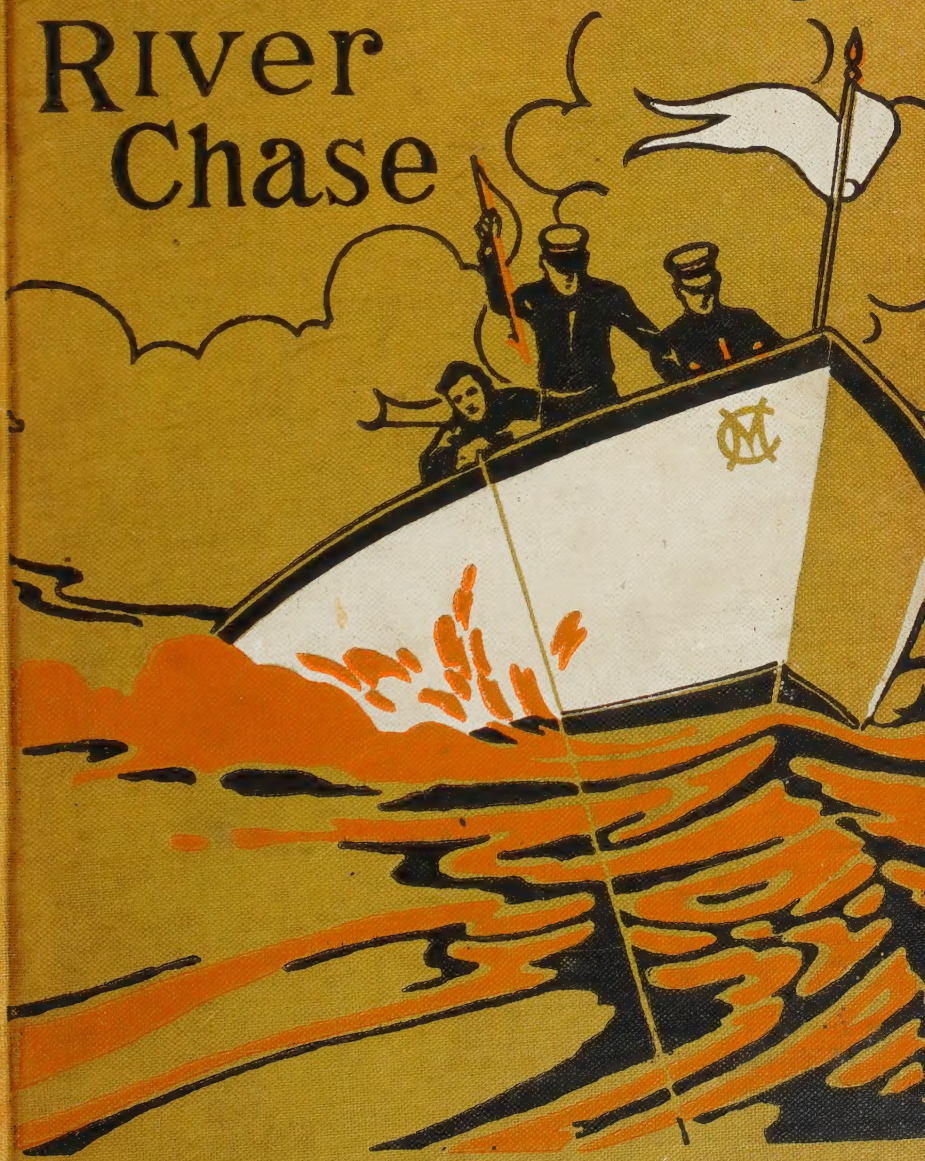
Motor Boat Boys

River Chase



Louis Arundel

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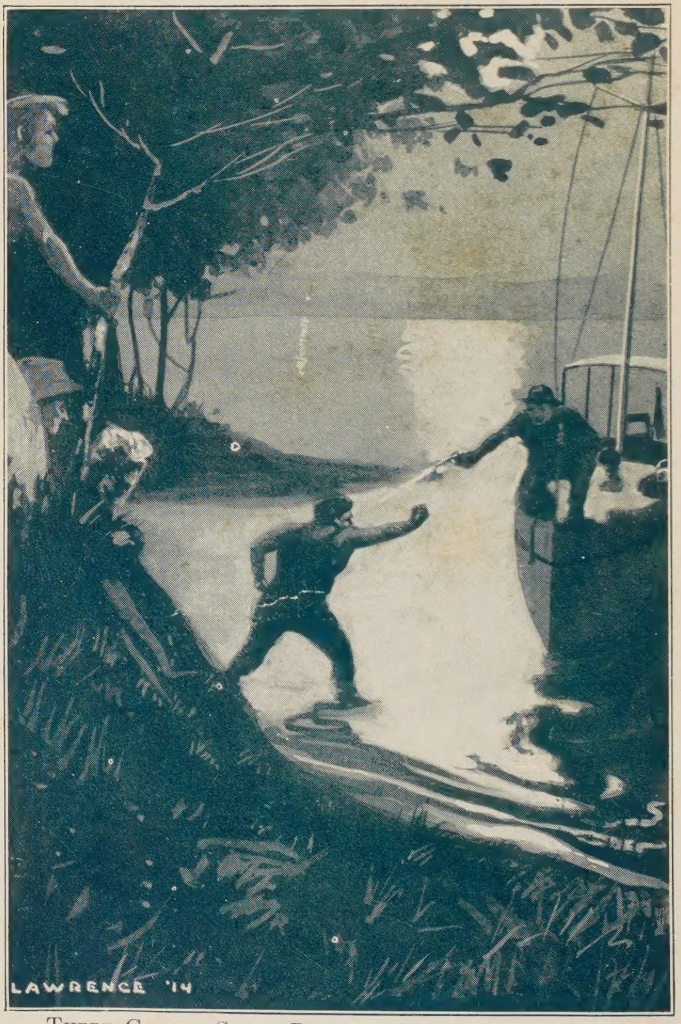

THERE CAME A SHARP REPORT AND A FLASH OF FLAME

MOTOR BOAT BOYS' RIVER CHASE

OR

Six Chums Afloat and Ashore

By

LOUIS ARUNDEL

Chicago
M. A. DONOHUE & COMPANY

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Chicago

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The Motor Boat Boys' River Chase

or

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By Louis Arundel

CHAPTER I

READY FOR THE START

"What are we waiting for, Commodore Jack?"

"Yes, I'm the last one to be in a hurry, boys, but it seems to me we ought to be getting away. The river ain't waiting up for us, you notice."

"Hold your horses, Buster, and count noses; perhaps you'll find that there are only five of us present."

"Huh! guess you're right, Josh Purdue; but what's become of Jimmie. I never heard a splash, and I don't see him swimmin', if he is a regular water duck. Water's too cold any way, this fine April day, for goin' in."

"Why, Jack sent him back to the post office to see if there was any mail. He's thinking of George here, who's expecting a letter from

that sweet little Southern girl he met last fall, when we were knocking around the Florida Keys in our motor boats, after coming down the coast."

"Rats! speak for yourself, Josh!" exclaimed the fifth member of the party, whose name seemed to be George, and who was a nervous, active boy, one of those kind who are always wanting to do things in a hurry;" didn't I see you get a lavender colored letter only last week, and when I walked past him purposely in the post office, fellows, oh! my goodness! you ought to have sniffed the lovely perfume that oozed out of that envelope. Did Josh tear the end off? Not that I could notice; but he took out his knife, and cut it so carefully like, you'd think——"

"Sure we've got all the grub aboard, Jack?" asked the said Josh, who had turned more or less red in the face with confusion at being so unexpectedly attacked, "because it'd be a mighty tough thing to get snugly settled in the first camp of the season, and find you've gone and left that elegant home-cured ham to home."

"Our ham's safe, all right; I'm looking right at it now!" declared George, as he stared at the rosy face of Josh, and chuckled aloud.

"I've gone over the list, and checked things off, with the help of Herb here; and so far as we could tell, there's nothing missing. Things seem to be in good shape, after lying all winter in the boat-yard. And the engines work splendidly," was the report of the boy named Jack, to whom the others seemed to look as though he might have some right to that title of "Commodore," being the chief officer of the motor boat club.

They were standing on the river bank just below a small town that was situated on the Upper Mississippi; and fastened to the shore by stout cables were three power boats of vastly different patterns.

One of them, owned by George Rollins, was a speed boat, narrow of beam, and capable of doing wonderful stunts in the way of annihilating space, whenever the big powered motor chose to act decently, which happened more frequently in these days than in the past, when it used to give the skipper much trouble. This boat was known as a freak, and went under the name of the Wireless.

The second was a good, roomy craft, which George called a "punkin-seed," because it took up so much room. Herbert Dickson was the satisfied owner of this boat, and as it bore the

name of Comfort, it may readily be understood that the captain was a quiet, unassuming lad, who as a rule minded his own business, and always wanted comfort before speed. Still, it had often happened that Herb got to his destination long before George, who spent so much time tinkering with his balky engine, while that of the roomy craft had never been known to act sulky, or quit business, but worked right along like a well-oiled clock.

The third boat was a happy medium between the other two, and went under the name of the Tramp. Jack Stormways held the wheel of this, and as a rule the absent member, Jimmie Brannagan, served as the crew. The Tramp was a reliable article, and probably better fitted for cruising than either of the others, when one wanted an all-round craft, capable of speed, and yet not cramped for room, or cranky in action.

These six lads had formed a club, and during the last two years had been able, by reason of fortunate circumstances whereby they came into a considerable sum of money, to make several long cruises.

These have been narrated at length in previous volumes of this Series, and the reader of the present book, who has not had the pleas-

sure of making the acquaintance of Jack and his chums up to now, and would know more about them, is referred to the earlier numbers for full particulars, with the assurance that he will find an abundance of lively reading there.

Their first cruise had been down the Father of Waters all the way to New Orleans, where they had a mission to perform. After that they had the boats shipped to Clayton on the St. Lawrence; and for the better part of vacation time cruised among the Thousand Islands, and on the Great Lakes, going up through the wonderful Soo Canal, and seeing everything that was worth while in that enchanted region.

Then, in the winter, they were given a glorious chance to start down the Atlantic coast, taking the inside route away from the ocean, and reaching Florida after some of the most stirring adventures ever told.

And as their time had not been exhausted, they put in some weeks of pleasure in navigating among the Keys of the Florida peninsula, meeting with many stirring adventures, all of which have been faithfully chronicled for the reading of our boys.

And now, here were the Easter holidays come, and a little river excursion planned, down to a big island that lay some ninety miles

or more below the home town, and which was an object of more or less curiosity to the passengers on the river steamboats, because of the strange stories that were told about mysterious lights seen there, and queer noises that had been heard from time to time.

Fishermen sometimes stopped there, in several little old huts they had erected; but of late years they seemed to have rather abandoned the island for other more favored localities; declaring that the fishing was no longer good there, and all that; but it was secretly passed around that they had been frightened off through some means; and so the island had come to have a bad name.

These bold lads liked nothing better than to explore such a place, and learn for themselves whether there was any truth in the wild stories going around. There was always a sort of peculiar fascination for them in exploding silly stories about haunted houses, and mills, and all such things. On several occasions Jack and his five chums had just looked into such affairs, and proved how foolish the talk had been. And during the winter they had often talked about Bedloe's Island, and what people were saying about it; until finally some one proposed that when Easter came along, with more than a

week of freedom from school duties, they take a run down the river, and camp there; fish and loaf, and just have the best possible time, in spite of all the ghosts that ever rose up from the grave when the solemn hour of midnight came around.

And here they were, only waiting for the return of Jimmie, when they meant to go aboard, cast off the lines, float out upon the swirling waters of the great river, and then starting their engines, go speeding down the current.

Although George, always in a hurry, might be expected to show impatience, even stout Buster, who was well named, had confessed to a feeling of anxiety to get started. They all loved this life on the water so much, that after being shut up between the walls of the high school building for some months now, five days in a week, they were just wild to be afloat.

"What d'ye suppose Clarence Macklin'd say if he saw our bully little flotilla all ready, with steam up, to start on this new voyage?" Buster asked, a few minutes afterwards, as they stood there, keeping an anxious eye toward the border of the near-by town, and along the

river road which Jimmie would have to use to reach them.

This same Clarence had always been a thorn in the flesh of the motor boat boys ever since the club was started. He had certain habits that the others did not like, and when he applied for admission, it was no surprise that he had been black-balled.

After that Clarence, who was of a mean disposition, could never forgive Jack and his chums; and he had lost no opportunity to annoy them, often going to extremes in his desire to make them all the trouble that he could.

During their cruise down the Mississippi, and when upon the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes he had bobbed up every little while, with his fast boat, known under the name of Flash, and there were times when Jack and his friends just hated the sight of that contemptuous face of Clarence Macklin.

So when Buster mentioned it now, the boys looked at each other, with a little anxious expression on their faces.

"Oh! I guess we needn't look for any more trouble from Clarence," Jack remarked. "He's kept clear of us all winter, you know; and perhaps he's let the whole thing drop. I hope so, anyway."

"Well, I know Clarence better than the rest of you," said Herb, "because I used to chum with him before I found better fellows to go with; and you can take it from me that when he's quiet, that's the time he's to be feared most of all, for he's sure to be hatching up mischief. That brain of his is never still. And ever since we got back from Florida he's been listening, second-hand, to the great stories we had to tell, and just eating his heart out with envy because he couldn't have been there too."

"Yes," put in Josh Purdue, with a frown, for he had had many unpleasant experiences with the said Clarence, and the mention of that name acted on him as a red flag would on a bull; "and I happen to know that Bully Joe, the feller Clarence still hangs on to for his crony, heard me tell a gentleman about the trip we expected to take during Easter holidays; and when I saw him running down the street so fast you could a-played marbles on his coat-tail, I just knew he was in the biggest hurry ever to tell Clarence all about it."

"Oh! then that explains why you've been keeping an eye out on the river so much all the time we've been standing here," remarked Jack. "Now, I thought you were only trying to figure on the strength of the current, and how

long it ought to take us to drop down to Bedloe's Island."

"We'll be there before the sun drops out of sight; that is, wind and weather, and the engine of the Wireless permitting," said Josh.

"Now, never you mind about what my motor is going to do," spoke up George, who, in spite of all the tricks that had been played on him by his balky engine, still had an abiding faith in its ability to do wonders, and was always sure he had solved the combination that had been bothering him, this time for good. "I've been working a whole lot on that same machine since our last cruise down among the oyster reefs of Florida, and I'm dead sure I've got it fixed now so that she'll never go back on me again. P'raps she won't be quite as swift as before, but then I'm coming to the conclusion that speed ain't everything when you're on a long trip. You fellows used to take it so comfy, while I was always fretting, and worrying over my motive power."

"Hear! hear!" exclaimed Jack, "the old buccaneer has seen a great light, and is half converted right now. Chances are, Herb, he'll be offering to trade with you before long."

At that George looked daggers at the Com-

fort, riding like a contented duck on the water near by.

"Perhaps I may, when I want a tub," he said, severely; "but I don't think that day'll ever arrive, Jack."

"All the same," spoke up Josh, who had often been Herb's companion on the beamy boat, and knew the luxury of having plenty of room, without being told a thousand times to keep still, because he was rocking the boat; "I can remember the time when you were mighty glad to come aboard that same tub, and beg a breakfast from the skipper, because your silly cranky Wireless was out of commission or sunk. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, George. Time may come again when you'll feel like begging the pardon of that noble craft. Many's the happy day I've had while serving my time on her. She's a dandy, that's what."

"Thank you, Josh!" said Herb, quietly; but there was a satisfied gleam in his eyes that spoke louder than words; for Herb really loved his boat, and took it to heart more than easy-going, reckless George imagined, when the scornful member of the club chose to speak slightingly of her.

Possibly George felt twinges of remorse, as his memory carried him back to certain occa-

sions in the adventurous past, for he tossed his head, and went on to say:

"Oh! she's all right, for those who don't care anything about getting along in a rush; but you know I never could stand that sort of thing. I'm too much a bundle of nerves. When I've set my mind on doing a thing I don't like to be kept waiting. Herb wouldn't fancy my boat any more'n I do his; and there you are."

"Well, we'll soon be off now," remarked Buster, joyfully.

"Yes, because there comes Jimmie," added Jack.

Jimmie Brannagan was an Irish boy, as his name announced. He was a sort of ward of Jack's father, who held some little money in trust until the lad came of age. His parents had been of a good family, and while Jimmie chose to talk in a species of brogue, that was amusing to his mates, he could really use as good language as any fellow, if he chose to exert himself. He lived with the Stormways, and was much in the company of Jack, being a warm-hearted boy, impulsive, and a friend who would stick through thick and thin.

He was seen to be half running along the road, as though eager to join his comrades,

and get started on the joyous trip; for Jimmy was as happy as a bird when aboard a boat. As a rule he acted as Jack's team-mate; but there were times when changes in the crews had to be made, owing to a disinclination on the part of Buster, Jimmy, and Josh to serve any great length of time aboard the wobbly Wireless; for they declared that the narrow boat was just about as nervous as its skipper, and kept the crew on edge all the time.

"What's he waving that newspaper for, d'ye think?" Buster asked, presently.

"You might guess a thousand years, and never know," remarked George, "but he'll be along right soon now, and then we'll find out. Take a sprint, Jimmie; stretch a single into a two-bagger, and slide for second! Here you come, old top! Now, what's all the row about; tell us?"

Jimmie, red-faced, freckled, good-natured Jimmie, grinned, and held out the open newspaper toward them.

"Sure and they do be havin' the dickens av a time up beyant us. Look at the illegant head-lines, would ye? 'Bowld robbery! Thaves break into the Bank, and loot the Safe av a Forchune! Lawrence all excited over the visit av yeggmen! Reward offered for tha appre-

hension av the Rascals.' Whoop! now, don't that sound loike another time when we was sthartin' down the river. History, begorra, does love to repate itsilf. But for the love av goodness lit's get off. I'm that ager to feel the water gurgling underneath the keel av a boat, I could straddle a log, and take me chances av a cruise down the ould river. Jack, darlint, give the worrd!"

CHAPTER II

THE CRUISE BEGUN

"All aboard!" sang out Jack, as he thrust the paper containing such sensational news into his pocket, to be glanced over at some more convenient season, and little suspecting how it would enter into the fortunes of the party of fun-loving boys while on their Easter holidays' cruise.

Everybody immediately seemed to be in motion, and the way in which the various crews stood by to cast off hawsers, while the skippers looked to their engines, was well worth seeing.

"Let go!" called the commodore of the boat club, when he saw that everything was ready.

The ropes were unfastened, and the three lads sprang aboard, just as the current began to grip each boat, and cause it to slowly start upon the new voyage that appeared so mild in the beginning, yet which was destined to be written down as one of the most adventurous of all those the six boys had enjoyed.

"Whoop! we're off!" yelled Buster, as he scrambled on board the Wireless, in his usual

clumsy way, that brought a word of warning from George, and caused the boat to careen badly.

"You will be off, if you try that sort of racket many times," declared the skipper. "What d'ye take this racer for, a canalboat? Be more careful Buster, how you lounge around. I guess they nicknamed you right when they called you Hippopotamus, Pudding, and all that sort. Now, sit down exactly in the middle, and when you do have to move, be careful not to shift your weight too sudden-like. No boat can do its prettiest when it isn't on an even keel."

"Say, is my hair parted exactly in the middle, George? If it ain't, please let me get it straight before you start!" observed the fat boy, with a touch of satire in his voice, something Buster seldom indulged in; but he had sailed the stormy seas with George before and could look back to many a sad time aboard that most uncomfortable Wireless; still the three fellows had drawn lots to see who would have to stand for the agony on this new cruise, and it had fallen to poor Buster to play the part of victim.

George did not reply to this shot. He was busy with his engine, and both the other boats were already moving off, with the rapid popping of their exhausts announcing that everything was working in apple-pie order.

"Please don't tell me that we're all up the flue, even before we get started, George?" pleaded Buster, turning pale with apprehension.

"Keep still, won't you, Buster; you bother me," replied the other, still working at his engine. "It's only a little thing, that don't matter much. And you see, it gives us a chance to let the others get a lead. You know how much I like to come up from behind, and rush ahead? Well, that's what we're going to do now. Be a sport, Buster, and don't whine so much. Everything's going to be lovely, and the goose will hang high, I can tell you."

"I guess it will," sighed the fat boy, with a resigned expression on his face, as though he realized that he was in for it, and might as well make the best of a bad bargain.

The boat was floating down the current, as Buster had pushed out from the shore with a pole, after getting aboard. The other craft had gotten some little distance away, and doubtless those on board were indulging in the usual "I told you so's" that accompanied every mishap on the part of the Wireless, for both Jimmie and Josh could be seen looking back, and even waving their hands, as though saying good-bye.

Then all at once there came a quick series

of sharp sounds, and George looked up with a proud expression on his face, as the little power-boat began to rush through the water at race-horse speed.

"What did I tell you, Buster?" he observed, as he clutched the wheel, and turned the boat's head in a direct line with the others of the little fleet; "and after this, please don't act so impatient. Leave it all to me. An engine's a delicate thing to handle, and as full of whims as a girl. Even the weather affects them at times; and they just have to be coaxed, and led along. But I flatter myself I've got this thing down fine, now, and we won't have any trouble with it on this trip, while I cut circles around the other fellows."

That was a pet hobby with George, making speed, and "running rings" around his comrades. Nothing tickled him more than to be able to do this, even though it failed to bother Jack or Herb in the least.

"Mebbe you're right, George," replied Buster, meekly, "you see, when it comes to mechanics my education has been sadly neglected, and I couldn't run an engine if my very life depended on it. All I've noticed is, that the other motors don't seem to bother about weather, or any old thing. They go plodding

right along like they had business to do, and didn't mean to be halted."

"That's just it, Buster," remarked the other eagerly, "they never have troubles of their own because they're slow-pokes, like heavy farm horses. It's the highly bred racer that's all nerves, you know. But look at us eating up space, will you? Don't we fly along, though? This is what I like, Buster. What are you looking at me that way for?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to sneeze, George, and I hope it won't—ker-chew! oh! my, it's coming again, ker-chew! Excuse me, George. I'll try and not let that happen often, if I can help it."

George looked at his companion rather suspiciously. He could not tell whether Buster really meant what he said, or was speaking in irony. But the gallant way in which the narrow boat was cutting the water gripped his attention again, and after that he could not bother himself with minor things.

They soon overtook the other two boats moving along in company. Jack could have easily gone ahead of the beamy Comfort had he wished, but he preferred to stay by Herb, so that the crews could exchange opinions from time to time. In his mind a large part of the pleasure to be gotten out of cruising came from

this sociability; whereas George would be rushing off by himself, satisfied if only he could make a mile in a fraction less time than at any previous time.

In ten minutes George was far ahead, and making the water fly out on either side as he urged his engine on to do its prettiest.

"Up to his old tricks again," remarked Josh, as he tidied up a little aboard the Tramp, secretly delighted that luck had given him a berth with the commodore, whom he admired greatly.

"Well, what did you expect?" replied Jack, who was taking things easy, with his engine working like a charm, "what's bred in the bone can never be beaten out of the flesh, they say; and George, with his nervous ways, cares only for racing, whenever he can coax anybody to give him a go. But mark what I say, Josh, it's only a question of time before he rubs up against his old motor troubles again. He's never satisfied when he's got the thing running smoothly, but has to go tinkering at it to see if he can't get another fraction of speed out, and then all at once it balks, and refuses to work at all."

"Yes," remarked Josh, with a wide grin, "we may be towing the Wireless back home

yet; and it wouldn't be the first time, either, Jack."

"Well, hardly," mused the skipper, smiling himself as memory carried him back to other scenes connected with their numerous cruises in these same boats.

"Does George know that we expect to tie up at noon, and have a bite ashore; or will he be silly enough to want to rush along that way, and get to the island long before we think of pulling in there?" Josh went on to ask.

"He knows our plans all right," answered the other, "though you can never tell what George will do, he's so full of notions. But as stuff to eat is aboard the roomy Comfort, and we're carrying the rest, unless he wants to starve poor old Buster, so as to cut down his weight, and make less ballast for the speed-boat to carry, I guess he'll haul in about eleven and wait for us.

"Oh! I don't envy Buster his job of holding down that bucking broncho of a Wireless," Josh chuckled. "I c'n see him right now, sitting there, holding on, and looking like he was tryin' to accomodate his breathin' with the panting of the engine, while George he looks daggers every time Buster gulps in a wad of air at the wrong time."

"Oh! come now, Josh, it isn't quite so bad as all that," declared Jack, with a shake of his head. "And even George couldn't keep Buster from having his own way, once he gets started. It's good he learned how to swim long ago, because chances are, he'll be overboard more than once before this voyage is done."

"Mebbe George 'll throw him over, when he gets nervous, and Buster keeps wobbling around, making the boat roll to beat the band, eh, Jack?"

"Well, you know how that is yourself, because that's what happened when you had the job of crew aboard his boat," the skipper of the Tramp went on to say; which reminder seemed to afford Josh considerable amusement, to judge from his laughter.

They went on steadily, putting mile after mile behind them. Now and then some river craft was encountered, though these were of course not near so numerous as would have been the case below the confluence of the Missouri and Ohio with the Father of Waters. Sometimes it was a steamboat that was breasting the current; or it might be a plodding towboat, with a barge or two alongside. And then again they overtook a queer looking shantyboat,

which had the appearance, with its cabin, of a cheese box on a raft.

All these familiar sights were eagerly observed by Jack and his companion, as well as the two upon the other boat, for they recalled pleasant memories.

George had gone so far ahead that his little boat looked like a dot upon the water; but possibly he would remember in time that he had no means of satisfying hunger aboard the Wireless, and might anchor to await their coming, giving Buster a chance to wet a line, for the fat boy had taken a great fancy for fishing, and was always complaining that he did not get half the opportunities to indulge in his favorite sport that he would like.

Now and then they would pass a town upon either shore of the river, although as a rule these were not so plentiful in this section, where the banks were inclined to be marshy.

The morning was gradually wearing away, and everything seemed to be going smoothly. Josh expressed himself as surprised that hours had passed, and still the nettlesome speed-boat continued to keep going along, as though George had indeed finally mastered the secret of its precious unreliable behavior.

"But when George is around, you c'n expect

any old thing to happen," he wound up with, "and even when things are working smoothly, he won't be satisfied till he upsets the combination again, you see if it ain't so."

Jack did not attempt to contradict his prediction, because he also knew George like a book and thought pretty much the same way.

Just about eleven, Josh declared that they seemed to be gradually getting nearer the pilot boat of the party, as George liked to have his craft called; though for that part he would have made a most unreliable guide, and had the others chosen to follow him, they would have been led into many more messes than actually fell to their lot.

"That's because Buster has rebelled," Jack observed, "there's been a mutiny aboard that craft; and George had been told that for one Buster doesn't mean to miss his lunch at noon, just because the Wireless is making a record run."

"Oh! you mean they've thrown the old mud hook over, and are waiting for us slowpokes to come along, eh, Jack?"

"Just about that; but we're getting all the fun we want out of making slower time; and our engines won't go back on us either, in spite," laughed the other.

"Well, while we're gliding along in this fine way—I always like to use that word when speaking of cruising, it sounds so fine—I'll be getting up the menu for our first dinner ashore. It makes my mouth water just to think of a campfire again, after all that time. Brought your little old Marlin along, didn't you, Jack? P'raps we might get a few late ducks while we're out, if all of 'em ain't gone north by now. And if Buster only does his duty, and grabs up a fish now and then, why, it'll be just great."

So Josh, who used to be something of a cook in times past, amused himself in a way that suited his fancy, while they drew closer and closer to the place where the speed-boat awaited them.

George was full of boasting as usual, and predicted a record run for his craft. None of the others disputed his assertions, but they exchanged looks, for they had heard all this sort of talk before, and then seen poor disappointed George only too glad to take a tow in the end, with his engine stubborn, or broken down.

Together they continued on down the river; where they could readily tie to the bank, and go ashore to cook dinner.

There was a great deal of climbing back and forth, and everybody but George seemed bustling with business; he sat there, and pottered with his engine, as though some new idea had seized hold of him, and he meant to try one of his everlasting experiments that always ended so disastrously.

Then the voice of Buster was heard in the land, lamenting.

"It was there yesterday, because I put it in away with my own hands; and George here says he never opened that locker once; but now that I want to put it on, my new sweater has disappeared the funniest way ever. I wouldn't be surprised, fellers, if we found that some thief got aboard our boats last night, and couldn't resist taking that bully sweater with the red moon on the front; and that's what!"

CHAPTER III

BUSTER CAPTURES A FISH

"Chances are you left it behind in the shed where the boats were kept," George remarked, looking up from his work, "but I wish you'd just step ashore, and let me go on with my little job here, Buster. Excuse me for saying it, but whenever you swing around it makes the boat rock just awful."

"Oh! I'm a-goin' right away, George, and only too glad for a chance to set foot again on something solid, that won't sway every time I breathe wrong. Wait till I get my fish lines, will you? P'raps if I can't have the pleasure of wearing my new sweater, I might manage to pick up a few small finny denizens of the mighty Mississippi. And when it comes to *fish*, I know you fellows are fond of most any kind that swims."

"Except dog-fish; I draw the line there," objected Josh. "But here's some meat to bait your line with, Buster; you see, Jack brought a stake along, thinking we'd miss it all of a sudden; and we're going to fry some

onions with that. Makes your mouth water, don't it?"

"Makes me eyes run a-peelin' these same onions!" groaned Jimmie; "somebody please do be koind enough to take out me hanky, and woipe me tears away. 'Tis remimberin' me ould grandmither I am at this blissed minute and that's what makes me cry."

Buster kindly performed that brotherly duty, and then busied himself with his fish lines. Rod or pole he had none, nor did Buster ever bother with such a thing as a reel. A large hook, with a hunk of meat fastened to it, and dropped overboard, suited his ideas all right; after which he trusted to luck to bring him a capture.

The fire was started by Jack, and already Josh could be seen getting ready to serve as chef. He had fetched along a cute little white cap without a peak, which he donned whenever he had to serve as the "dish-slinger and pot wrestler," as he was fond of calling his occupation. It was intended to stand for his badge of authority; and when he had it on, the rest were supposed to be his willing slaves, ready to jump at his bidding.

There is no part of an outing that suits boys better than preparing meals, unless it is in dis-

posing of the same after they are cooked. With appetites whetted to a keen edge by the air, and freedom from anxiety, they can hardly wait until called to the feast, but wander around, begging the cook to please hurry, if he does not want to have a funeral on his hands.

There was always more or less merry talk passing back and forth while these six comrades tried and true, got dinner ready; for they were a good-natured lot, and very fond of each other, despite frequent bickerings, usually between George on the one hand, and some chum on the other.

Buster had managed to set his two lines, as best the conditions allowed. Since George was so touchy about his rocking the narrow boat with his clumsy movements, Buster had gone out to the beamy Comfort, and fastened one of his stout lines to a cleat he found handy. The other he had thrown out from the shore above, and tied to a stake driven into the earth, just as he had seen a snubbing-post used down in Florida, when sharks were being fished for around the inlets.

Every little while he would glance toward these lines, having arranged so that if a fish took hold, a little piece of white rag would be hoisted as a signal; very much on the order of

that frequently used by pickerel fishermen, when watching a dozen or two holes cut through the ice, each with its separate line.

The cooking progressed slowly. Josh said he was out of practice, but that when he got his hand in, all would be smooth sailing again.

He had plenty of assistance, for every one but George and Buster hung around, ready to lend a hand; and after he had fixed his snares with the baited hooks at the end, even the fat boy was willing to do anything Josh asked.

Finally the cook announced that everything was ready, and that they could draw up to the board. Of course this latter was only a figure of speech, for there was not a sign of a board around; the things were placed right on the ground, while the diners were expected to get their supplies on a tin platter, and in a tin cup; after which they were at liberty to squat like tailors, with their legs drawn up under them; or else retreat to the boats for more comfortable seats.

"Talk to me about your banquets," remarked Herb, as he started in on his rasher of steak and fried onions, "this beats anything that was ever invented. I wouldn't change places with a king, right now."

"Them's my sintimints!" echoed Jimmie, as well as a fellow could who had his mouth crammed full at the moment, so that he had to talk from one side.

"Hurry up, George, or you'll get left!" called Josh, noticing that the skipper of the speed boat had not come ashore.

"Oh! I suppose I'll just have to, but I'd rather be left to work here," replied George, nervously, whereat the rest glanced at each other, and the looks thus exchanged seemed to say as plainly as anything: "Wonder now if he's gone and done it, mixed things up with his cranky old engine, and don't seem able to get it to working right again; that would be just like Fussy George!"

It was more than pleasant to sit there, looking out upon the broad river and enjoying the feast that had been prepared as a starter to their camp life. The very wind that came sweeping across from the further shore, cool and delicious, seemed to be of a different brand to any that they enjoyed at home; so much do surroundings have to do with things.

No one seemed in any particular hurry but George, who bolted his dinner, and was back again on his boat long before any of the others had finished.

"Are we nearly half way there, do you think Jack?" asked Herb, who knew that the skipper of the Tramp kept track of all these things and had charts as well of the river.

"We've come forty-five miles since starting, because, you see, the current is pretty strong; and for once we haven't been held up by George's cranky boat," replied Jack, lowering his voice a little when saying this last, since there was no necessity for offending the chum whose little oddities gave them more or less fun during a cruise.

"Then that would mean we've still got a good fifty to go," suggested Buster.

"Somebody get a leather medal for Buster here, our Lightning Calculator. Now, it would take me ever so long to figure that forty-five from ninety-five really leaves fifty; but just see how he grabs the answer right off the reel. It won't be long before he has a little 'Professor' tacked to his name," and Josh chuckled as though he had really said something smart.

Buster did not seem to feel hurt; in fact, many of these little shafts just glanced from him as arrows might from the thick hide of a rhinoceros; which is not saying that Buster was impervious to ridicule, for that would be far from the truth, as he could be quite sensitive

at times; but Josh he treated with supreme contempt whenever the latter tried to be funny at his expense.

All this while Buster had tried to keep one eye on the places where his fishing lines were out. He fancied several times that he saw a white rag start to show, but before he could scramble to his feet, which was quite an effort for him, it was all over, and proved to be only a nibble, so that on each occasion he had to sink back again, and have patience.

There were good fish in the old Mississippi, and he knew it, so why should he not have his share of the spoils? In his moments of leisure, while preparing his hooks and lines, no doubt Buster had pictured himself as hauling in some monster that would be the envy of all his camp-mates; and beside which he must have his picture taken, as positive proof that he was the successful angler.

Jack knew that once they started they would be apt to make their destination in less than five hours; so that there was no need of haste. He had seen much of George's hurrying, and what grevious results it often brought in its train, that somehow he felt more averse to making haste than ever.

So he and Herb and Andy sat there, chatting,

as they finished their dinner, with Buster squatting alongside like a great toad, waiting for that bite which did not seem to materialize very fast, and in a sort of hazy way listening to what was said by his three chums; Josh being busy with the cooking utensils, which he liked to keep as clean as sand and water could scour them, after the most approved camp methods known.

All at once there was a heave on the part of Buster; who seemed to be actuated by some wild impulse, for he made frantic efforts to get up; but as he had been sitting on one of his legs, it had gone to "sleep," so that even after the fat boy did succeed in gaining an erect position, he came very near falling over into the fire that was still smouldering.

"Hi! what's all this mean; got a fit, Pudding?" shouted the alarmed Josh, as he supported the swaying form of the other for just five seconds; when Buster broke loose, and went limping toward the river, uttering all sorts of vaporings, in his excitement.

"Oh! it's only a fish, after all," grunted Josh, who had begun to believe that there was something tremendous the matter.

But at any rate it meant a whole lot for Buster, who, scrambling aboard the Comfort made a bee line for the spot where he had fastened his

stout cord. Sure enough the piece of white rag was fluttering from the top of the rudder post, having been pulled up there when the fish had seized the bait, and started away with it.

Everybody just naturally stopped whatever they were doing at the time, to watch the fisherman. Even George poked his head up to see what all the row was about, and for the moment forgot his troubles with that cranky engine.

Buster was giving little cries of mingled delight and wonder.

"Wow! it's sure a big one this time, boys! Takes your Uncle Nick to coax the dandies to take hold. Yes, I spit on my bait every time, and that's the trick to fetch 'em. That'll do, Josh, I'm running this circus, and I'd thank you not to butt in. Watch me land him now, boys! Say, ain't this fun, though? Worth while coming fifty miles to see me do the great act. Wow!"

"Look out, Bumpus, or he'll pull you in!" called Jack; but evidently the warning meant in good earnest, fell on deaf ears. Bumpus was not going to be denied the pleasure of landing his own capture.

They saw him unfasten the cord with trembling hands, hardly able to contain himself. Then he threw himself back in a noble attitude

that made Josh compare him with "Ajax defying the lightning," which every one has seen in marble.

All at once Herb gave a shout that was echoed by others.

"Whip the cord around the cleat again, Buster, quick!"

Buster attempted to obey, realizing when it was too late that he had cut off more than he could manage when he tried to land that monster fish; but unable to do so, and unwilling to let go of the line, for he had a very stubborn nature, the next thing they knew there was a great splash, and Buster was wallowing in the yellow waters of the Mississippi.

CHAPTER IV

A MYSTERY LOOMS UP

That was not the first time Buster Longfellow had taken an involuntary bath in the Father of Waters, as his comrades knew only too well. At the same time, this fact did not lessen the excitement that followed his disappearance one little atom.

Such a splashing and grunting and wallowing as there was when the fat boy took that sudden plunge; why, one could easily imagine a whole troop of hogs had been coaxed in to being scrubbed, preparatory to an exhibition at the county fair.

And the way the water flew was a caution. A young whale working its way up the river from the gulf, or rather a porpoise, since whales are not to be found often in the Sunny South, could not have created a greater racket.

Of course every fellow, after that first shock, sprang to his feet, and made for the shore as fast as his legs could carry him. It might be a ludicrous sight, all very well, but there was a little element of danger connected with it; and

they were comrades true, who could not stand by, and see poor Buster dragged out into the middle of the river by a fish.

When the splashing had in a measure subsided, they discovered the stout figure of Buster. He was standing in the yellow water up to his waist and tugging with all his might at the fish line, which he seemed to have wrapped around both hands, as though just determined that his prize should not get away.

Now the boy would gain a foot, and seem to be dragging his capture toward land; when there would be a sudden tremendous effort on the part of the fish to escape, and the first thing Buster knew, he was being pulled back again, though he fought tooth and nail to hold his own.

Once his feet flew from under him, owing to the slippery condition of the mud on which he stood. At that a great "Oh!" broke out from the other five boys; and Jack, who had been hastily removing some of his outer garments, with the intention of being ready in case his help was needed, was just on the point of jumping in, when Buster again emerged from the turmoil, rising up like a Neptune, the water pouring from his head like a young Niagara.

"Let him go, Buster; he's too much for you!" shrilled George, who was leaning over the edge

of his boat with a pole in his hand, and regardless for once that the cranky Wireless careened far down until her beam end almost took in water.

"I won't!" snapped back the stubborn Buster, shaking the drops from his face, as a New Foundland dog might after a bath. "He's mine, and I'm going to grab him if it takes all summer, see?"

He had managed to get a good footing once more, and started to tug manfully with the result that he immediately gained several yards. This was the best he had done as yet, and in consequence he seemed to receive inspiration to make a still greater exertion.

After that the victory was as good as won.

Buster marched out on the bank the line over his shoulder; and as soon as they could do so without wetting themselves Josh and Herb seized hold of the stout cord.

"Wow! it sure is a whale!" exclaimed George, from his position of vantage on board his boat, as something that flapped, and made a tremendous splutter, was dragged out of the river, and up on the shore.

It was a tremendous yellow catfish, one of that species that help to make the Mississippi famous among market fishermen.

"Whee! must weigh about as much as Buster

does, and that's a fact!" remarked Josh, as he surveyed the monster.

It was not a lovely spectacle, with its slippery skin, and great gaping mouth resembling that of a big bulldog.

"What whiskers it's got, the omadhaun!" Jimmie called out, "and say the horn on his back, wud yees? Whoo! but 'tis a brave lad ye arre, Buster, to holdt sich a monster stiddy, and walk ashore wid the same. I take off me hat till yees, so I do, me laddybuck!"

Buster was panting like anything, and could hardly get his breath; but Jack believed he had never seen him look quite so happy, as when he stood over that giant Mississippi cat, and had his picture snapped off by George, who got his new kodak out especially to preserve the incident among the annals of the club.

"Get some dry clothes on you in a hurry, Buster," suggested Jack, after they had all congratulated the hero of the occasion on his dogged pluck, "it's all very well holding on like that, but you ought to know when it's time to let go, too. I thought that time had come when it pulled you under. You had the cord wrapped around both hands, Buster, a very foolish thing to do, I think. If you hadn't been able to get your footing again, and had no

friends near by to lend a hand, it was apt to go hard with you. And let me tell you there have been more fishermen than a few drowned by just such a foolish trick as that. Hold on as long as you want, but never put yourself in a position where you can't let go."

Buster smilingly agreed that this was good advice, and promised to remember. He was feeling so remarkably happy over his great luck that he could not have taken offense at anything, and would have made the rashest sort of promises.

And while he rooted out his clothes bag, so as to get some dry togs, Jack and Andy proceeded to cut up the big fish; because they knew that, horrible looking though the creature might be to a sportsman, its flesh is highly esteemed as an article of food along the length of the whole river.

It was no easy task they had set themselves; and more than once they wished the slippery catfish had broken loose, and gone off with Buster's hook dangling from its jaw like cheap jewelry, with which to dazzle its fellows. But in the end they managed to secure all the meat they wanted, and tossed the balance into the river to feed its kind.

"Now, let's be getting off!" called out Jack,

after he had washed up, and in some measure removed the fishy smell from his hands.

Since the other boys had taken everything aboard, there was really nothing to detain them; and presently the merry reports from the various engines told that the three motor-boats had again resumed their journey down the Mississippi in the direction of Bedloe's Island.

That was an afternoon not soon to be forgotten by any of them, for the air was just warm enough to make them delight in lying around, and taking a sun bath. No doubt George was having the time of his life with Buster, who must be so chock full of his recent triumph that every little while he would burst out with a new string of questions concerning his battle, and wishing to know what it looked like from every angle ashore.

But the time passed, and as George's engine gave him no new trouble, the little flotilla made splendid progress while the hours crept on.

At just three-forty-seven Jack gave a blast from his old conch shell horn which he had brought up from Florida with him—in fact, every boat was provided with a similar means for exchanging signals, and the boys had arranged a regular code, so that when separated

by a mile or so they could talk with each other after some sort of fashion.

This single blast just now announced that Jack believed he had sighted the island that was to be their destination, away down the river. Judging from their speed, aided by the swift current, they ought to make it inside of another half hour. This would give them plenty of time to hunt a good landing place, where they could put up their tent, and make things at least half way comfortable before night set in.

Although the boys could sleep aboard, and very comfortable too, they preferred being ashore whenever it was possible, all save George, who could seldom be coaxed to desert his beloved Wireless craft, even for a brief time. He acted as though he dreaded lest that engine think up some new trick if he left it alone; eternal watchfulness was the price of victory with George; and his chums often declared that when he was on a cruise George hardly knew what sort of country he passed through, for keeping his nose down so persistently over that motor of his.

Jack's prediction came true, and when a quarter after four came around, they were running along the shore of a wooded island which he announced was the object of their search.

"Where are we going to land, Jack?" called out Buster, for the three boats were now very close together, and the crews had been exchanging comments on the sombre appearance of the lonely island for some time past.

"I don't know," came the answer, "because I've never been here before. We'd better just float along down close to the shore, and keep an eye out for a suitable landing place. If we don't find one on this side, by the time we get to the foot of the island, why, what's to hinder our working along up the other shore, and looking for it there?"

"That's so, Jack!" admitted Buster, who was in one of his finest humors; though for that matter they seldom knew the fat boy to be anything but amiable and good-natured, as most of his kind are.

They must have passed almost to the very tail end of the long island when Josh let out a whoop, and called the attention of his comrades to what seemed to be a little bay that formed a tiny cove, with a sandy beach beyond.

"Just the ticket!" agreed Jack, "looks like it had been scooped out for a landing place."

"Bet you them fishermen come right in; and we'll be apt to find some of their huts around back there," suggested George, who had pos-

sibly heard more stories about mysterious Bedloe's Island than any of the others, for he had been making poor Buster's flesh run cold during the afternoon with accounts of strange things people said had occurred to make the place shunned.

"Then there must be good fishing around here," remarked Buster, with the air of one who ought to be consulted whenever such sport were mentioned, because he had surely won his spurs that day, if any one ever did.

"Listen to him talk," broke out Josh. "Now he's got the fishing bee on his brain and he'll just as like as not be at it morning, noon and night, till we get sick of the smell of fish. One good thing about it that I can see is, after he's been living on fish food for a whole week Buster will have brains enough to last him all summer, because they say it makes 'em, you know. Sometimes I think he's a little short in his supply, especially when he wraps a fish line around both hands, when he's got a young whale at the other end."

They had no difficulty in passing into the little "bight," as Jack called the minature cove, for the water was deep enough for even the Wireless; although Jack said they would have to be sure and constantly keep tabs on whether

the river was rising or falling each day and night, since it would be mighty unpleasant to awaken some fine morning to discover that their motor boats were high and dry; as the water had gone down a foot while they slept.

They secured the craft ashore to trees that chanced to be growing close by; for floods did not often come to this upper part of the great river as they did below the confluence with the Ohio and the Missouri.

Then some of the things were taken to land; and the six boys were soon working like so many beaver, fixing camp.

The tent had to be erected; and after it had been partly placed in position a better spot was discovered, so that the job had to be all done over. As the day was growing near its close and darkness might be expected to fall upon them before another hour, there was no time for loitering. Why, even George had been made to see the error of his ways, and forgot all about that everlasting motor of his for a short time, lending a hand to get things in shape around the camp.

Josh had plenty to do starting the fire, after fashioning a rude but effective cooking range out of the many stones that could be had along the shore for the picking up. They carried a

little contrivance that was very effective, being a sort of spider or gridiron patterned after the shelf in most kitchen ranges. Jack had had it made by the local blacksmith, and when it was laid across two ridges of rock, between which the red coals lay, they could place the coffee-pot, a skillet and even a kettle on the bars at the same time, without the constant danger of upsetting that always exists where a camper tries to cook with only a resting place of stones for his various utensils.

The others were busy at various duties when Josh was heard calling out, with a touch of authority in his voice, as became the chef, now placed in supreme command by reason of his exalted and important office.

"Whoever took that grub I left over here by the tree, better bring it back again right away, and quit meddlin' if he wants me to exert myself getting supper ready."

"What's that, Josh?" asked Jack, looking up from his work of fastening the lower rim of the tent to the pegs that had been driven securely into the earth.

"Why, you see, Jack," explained the other, lowering his aggressive voice a little when addressing the commodore, "I thought I'd make the fire over here till I saw you'd changed the po-

sition of the tent; and then I crossed over to where she's burning cheerfully now. So I laid some things down that I meant to cook for supper—two slices of that ham I cut off while afloat; a can of Boston baked beans, and part of the fish Buster hooked and that nearly got away with him. Now, mind you, I ain't mentionin' any names, but some busybody's gone and took the entire outfit, and hid it away. How d'ye think the cook c'n perform his calling, when they're playin' tricks on him like that, tell me?"

There was a dead silence for about half a minute, while the boys looked at each other questioningly.

Then Buster raised his hand, and said, earnestly:

"Not guilty, Jack, sure I never even saw the old ham; and ketch me a-playin' any tricks on the cook, and me that hungry I c'd eat any old thing."

One by one of the others, even to George, copied Buster's example, and solemnly denied having tried to annoy the hard-working Josh by purloining the stuff he had laid out for the evening meal.

"Must a mislaid it, that's what, Josh," declared Herb, consolingly. "Sometimes my

mind plays hob with me that way. Everybody get a move on and look for the grub. We just can't afford to have our goods floating around every-which-way right in the start. We've got to find it, that's what."

"Hold on, before you get to running around wild," interrupted Jack, and somehow when he spoke in that way it seemed as if all the other fellows felt as though Jack had conceived an idea, for he was always quick along those lines.

"What's doing, Jack?" inquired Buster.

"I want to ask Josh particularly where it was he laid that stuff out," continued the other, impressively.

"Why, just like I said, over ther by that clump of brush," the cook explained, as he pointed in the quarter indicated.

"On that flat stone, perhaps?" continued Jack.

"Now, that was just what I did, Jack," Josh went on to say, "and when I stepped over just now to get the stuff, why, it wasn't there. I scratched my head, and tried to remember moving it, but I'd take my affidavy that I never came back to get it till just now, after I got my fire good and ready. That's the way it was, Jack."

"Wait a bit," remarked the other, as he started for the spot in question.

They all watched him curiously. First he bent down, and sniffed of the stone.

"He's smelling to see if the ham ever rested there, that's what," declared Josh.

"And now look at him on his hands and knees, alongside that flat stone, would you?" remarked Buster, wonderingly. "Whatever do you reckon Jack's got in his head, fellers?"

"He's getting up now, and we'll know right soon, which is one comfort," George observed.

Jack beckoned them over, and as soon as they came running pell-mell, he wagged his head in a mysterious fashion, and pointed down to a spot near his feet.

"That stuff didn't walk off on its own account, boys; if you look sharp you'll see what did the little trick!" and as their eyes instantly turned down toward the ground they saw the plain imprint of a great big shoe there!

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST CAMP FIRE OF THE TRIP

"Holy smoke! so that's what the matter, is it?" exclaimed Buster, as he stared at the tell-tale track.

"A thief, that's what!" breathed George, angrily, as he turned to glance at the neighboring growth of trees, now partly lost in the gloom of coming night.

"And to think," remarked Herb, "that anybody could just slip along here back of these bushes, and grab our grub without one of us seeing him."

"Oh! we were all too busy doing our regular stunts to think of such a thing," explained Jack. "You see, Josh had all he wanted to do with the fire; some of us were putting up the tent the second time; and George had his hands full with his pet hobby, bothering over his engine. Why, it was as easy as falling off a log for him to just crawl up behind these bushes, reach out a hand, and then good-bye to all the fine stuff Josh had laid out so nice."

"Well, if that don't beat the Dutch!" ex-

claimed Josh, staring hard at the stone which bore such an important part in all this discussion, as though he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Look here," continued Jack, "and you can see where the ground is all rubbed up; that's where his knees scraped on the surface when he dragged one leg after the other, you know."

"My! it takes you to get on to these things, Jack!" declared Buster.

Andy had said nothing up to now, but seemed to be just as much puzzled and disturbed as the rest. He managed to put in his oar at about this point, however.

"Musha! they do be sayin' that this same ould island do be ha'nted; and 'tis me own silf that will be belavin' the same afther this, so I will!"

"Great governor! he means it was a regular ghost, Jack, d'ye hear that?" cried Buster, throwing up his chubby hands in rank despair.

Everybody seemed interested at once; for, while several of the boys, if asked to their face might have promptly declared they never believed in ghosts; still, it was so very queer, finding some unknown party on the island with the bad name, that they were inclined to listen with interest when Andy aired his views. Ghosts —of course not,—because they were all humbug,

anyway; but it was mighty strange how that stuff vanished so mysteriously.

Jack laughed out loud.

He was a level-headed, practical boy, and had not a grain of superstition in his whole body. Many a time had he and Andy argued and disputed upon this very score, and the one whose ancestors had come from the island across the sea had apparently so far as outward appearances went, at least, been convinced of the error of his ways, only to have the old belief crop up again unexpectedly on the first occasion. It was in the blood; and what is there cannot be argued away.

"Stop and think, Buster, and you, Andy," Jack went on to say, impressively, "ghosts wouldn't be apt to wear big boots, would they, and come creeping along, when they are popularly supposed to have the power of making themselves invisible?"

"That's so, Jack, you're right!" burst out George, enthusiastically. "Get your gun, and we'll take a look for the rascal, and make him stand and deliver."

But Jack paid no attention to this fiery threat; if they tried to carry out one-tenth of the things impulsive George suggested, it would surely keep them busy, well and good.

"And whoever heard of a hungry ghost?" Jack went on to say, so as to rub it in, good and hard. This fellow, whoever he could have been, must have been hungry; for he cribbed out ham and stuff the first shot. Well, it's gone; but thank goodness we've got plenty more; so I say, don't let's have such a little thing make us feel bad. Get busy, some of you, and fix the cook up with a second ration. Herb, cut two more slices off the ham, and Buster, you turn your hand at carving that hunk of fish we've still got. Such a trifle shouldn't upset fellows who had been through all we have, you know."

"No more it hadn't!" cried Buster.

"Bully for the Commodore; he's the right stuff!" exclaimed Josh, waving the stick of wood he happened to be holding in his hand at the time; and looking very much like a real French chef with his cute little white cap on his head.

"But hey, let's first of all get every bit of our stuff in the tent, and keep a close watch on the same," observed suspicious George. "First thing you know we'll just have to abandon our week of fun down here because we're starved out. We didn't agree to feed all the stray fishermen, or hoboes in the country, when we

laid in our supplies this time; ain't that a fact, Jack?"

It was strange how all the other boys almost invariably turned to Jack when they had advanced a proposition; as though his gurantee was all that was necessary to stamp the suggestion as a clever idea.

"Yes, you're right there, George; and while the rest of you are doing all you can to help Josh out, I'll be collecting the duffle in the tent, and fixing the same so it won't bother us much. If any chap manages to hook more of our stuff from under our very noses, he'll deserve it, that's all."

So saying, Jack started to carry things in under the canvas, for the tent had been about fully erected at the time Josh made his astonishing statement; and only needed to be fastened down a little more securely at the base, so as to be ready to stand any sort of a blow, such as might come along in the spring time here on the upper Mississippi.

The air was getting a little "nippy," as Buster called it; so that several of the motorboat boys had donned their sweaters. This made Buster start to again bemoaning the strange disappearance of his new one, that had the blue moon on the breast. He never could convince him-

self that he had mislaid it in the shed where the boats had been housed for the winter; and fancied that one of his chums must be hiding it from him; because every little while he would watch each one in turn, and with hope struggling afresh upon his rosy, plump face, only to have it die out again when he realized they were not dragging the familiar object out of their clothes bags.

Secretly Buster was determined that at the first chance he would rummage through each one of those bags himself, and make positive that his missing property was not reposing where it never should be found.

The supper preparations went on apace, and soon the most delightful odors ever sniffed by hungry cruisers began to permeate the surrounding atmosphere. Buster went into the tent, calling back over his shoulder:

"Just going to lie down a while on my blanket, to see how she goes, fellers. Fact is, I'm that cramped after a session aboard the speed boat that I c'n hardly stretch out. And then, to own up to the real truth, them smells make me just wild, and I can't stand it around the fire any longer. Just call me when everything's ready, Josh, that's a good feller. Oh! my! but that coffee is scrumptious; and the ham, good-

ness gracious! whoever smoked that pig knew how to fix things so's to set a hungry boy half crazy. Yum! yum! Don't forget to wake me, now, Josh!"

But of course it was not long before supper was declared ready, and the boys proceeded to gather around the spot where Josh had set things. Buster was not called, in fact there was no need, for he burst out of the tent like a young cyclone just at this time, and hastened to find a place to deposit his fat form in the circle.

"Hey! thought'd you steal a march on me, didn't you, fellers?" he demanded, trying to look very fierce, which was impossible, for he only screwed up his face and seemed comical at such times; "meant to just eat up my share, and then tell me you forgot all about giving me the high sign. But I was on to your little game, let me tell you. Could hear every word you said, and when Josh here told George to pass out his pannikin, that gave me my cue. Thank you, Josh, I believe I will dip in next; and Herb, fill my tin-cup with that coffee, please. Oh! ain't I glad we've got started at last. That last ten minutes was just awful to me!"

So Buster rattled on until the others begged him to stop it.

"Let the food close that trap of yours, Buster, please," said George. "That's the way he goes, ding-dong, the whole blessed day, fellows; until I can hardly think straight, when I'm trying to figure on how to bridle that high-stepper of a motor of mine."

They were soon all hard at work, and after the first keen edge of their appetites had been taken off, it was a merry group that gathered near the fire, eating, chatting and with a continual flow of wit passing back and forth.

Nevertheless Jack could not forget about the mysterious disappearance of the food, and every little while he would get up, to take a stroll around to the other side of the tent; just as though he half feared that some daring intruder might try to cut into the back of the canvas, with the intention of continuing his depredations.

"How about that old paper Andy brought with him?" asked George, after they had eaten all that was possible; and even Buster was seen to shake his head when Josh asked if anybody would have any more coffee, baked beans, crackers, or cheese.

"Say, that's a fact!" cried Herb, "we went and forgot all about it. You see, Jack crammed it in a pocket of his old jacket; and all of us

were that anxious to be off we didn't remember to have the account of the robbery read out. Got it yet, haven't you, Jack?"

"Sure I have," replied the other, "and if you wait a minute I'll get the same, so we can enjoy the thrilling story right here and now. Those kind of yarns always sound better around the blazing camp fire, you know."

"Kinder go with ghosts, and all that sort of thing, eh?" came from Buster, who was eyeing the remnant of ham in the fryingpan, and heaving a sigh, as though it really gave him a pain to think that his capacity seemed to have been reached before the last bit had been disposed of; that was next door to a sin with Buster, who would gorge himself rather than see the least thing wasted, or thrown away.

"Ghosts don't burgle any that I ever heard of," observed Josh, calmly picking up the said skillet, and with a fling sending a small portion of the fatty end of ham flying into the bushes, at which Buster sank back, disappointed.

"Arrah, sure they do the quarest things ye iver heard till on," declared Andy; and then gave a quick look at Jack, as though half expecting to be taken to task because of his clinging belief in hobgoblins, and all such things.

But Jack did not see fit to pay the slightest

attention to anything so trifling just then. He passed into the tent, to where he had hung his coat; for with his sweater on he had not felt the need of extra covering. And presently he came out again, carrying the paper in his hand.

"Now, isn't that too mean for anything, boys?" he remarked.

"What's gone wrong now, Jack; I hope more of our provisions haven't taken wings, and skipped out?" observed George; while Buster just sat there, hugging his fat knees and holding his breath while he waited to hear the worst.

"Oh! no; nothing like that," came the answer, "but you see I had this coat on a good part of the morning, and I guess the paper must have got wet somehow, for there's only part of the first page left; most of the account of the robbery is gone. But I'll read you what there is, if you want. It's the tail end, of course, Too bad it had to happen that way."

"Go on, then, and let's have what there is, Jack," urged Josh.

"About where the lines begin to run even it starts in this way," remarked Jack. " 'The only clues they have of the robbery consist, first of all, in several tools which Mr. Hasty, the blacksmith, identified as part of his machinist's outfit, showing that they had entered his shop;

and the fact that yesterday a dapper little naphtha launch, painted white, with a red band around the upper part, was known to be anchored just above town. Two parties occupied the same, one a well-dressed young fellow, with a sharp look about him; and the other a heavy man, more like a mechanic. The police have no doubt that these parties are the ones who broke into the bank, and cleaned out the vault. The smart looking young fellow must have planned the scheme. He was seen in the bank during the day, getting some information, and a big bill changed, and it is supposed that he took his bearings at that time he was chatting with the cashier. From the description the latter was able to give of his visitor it has been learned from St. Paul that the smooth faced young fellow was positively a well known and skilful crook called by the name of Slim Jim. The authorities hope to be able to get on to their track up or down the river shortly."

Just as Jack ended this report Buster was heard to give a startled cry.

"What ails him now?" demanded Josh, looking toward the fat boy.

"Just what I thought, he's gone and overfed, and now he's feeling a gripe coming on; he'll sure burst some fine day," grumbled George,

groaning to think that all during the trip he must put up with such a rolypoly of a crew as Buster Longfellow.

" 'Tain't neither," snapped the other, indignantly, "I c'n breathe as well as any feller present. I gave that little gasp-like because I was staggered, when Jack, he read about that trim little boat painted white, with the red trimmin' around the gunnel. Want to know why, don't you? Well, the fact is, fellers, I set eyes on that pirate craft myself, and not so very long ago either; fact is, just half an hour before we struck here. Now, what d'ye think of that, hey?" and Buster expanded perceptibly, doubtless feeling his own importance as the bearer of startling news.

CHAPTER VI

A STARTLING INTERRUPTION

"Whee!" exclaimed Josh, hardly able to believe his ears when he heard the fat boy make this astonishing declaration so positively.

George also expressed more or less surprise, though from the look on his face it was evident that he was beginning to guess something in connection with what his "crew" was stating.

Jack immediately took Buster in hand. It was the only way of making him tell all he knew, without forever "beating about the bush," and giving himself lots of airs; for Buster seldom found himself in the center of the stage; and when such an event did come along he wished to make the most of it. What boy, wouldn't, tell me?

"See here," Jack went on to say, "you want to tell us all about that, now, Buster; because you've just made a startling statement; and we hope you can back it up. How could you see that boat, and none of the rest of us notice it; tell us that in the first place."

"Shucks! that's easy enough, fellers," re-

plied the other, bent on making the most of his advantage. "Tell you how that was. You may remember that George found himself away ahead, near the close of the run; and as George, he doesn't like to hold up even a little bit, what did he do but spin away over to the other shore, and go down that, say about five miles above the upper end of this blooming old island."

"Oh! get a move on, old Ice-Wagon; you're as slow as molasses in winter!" groaned impulsive George; whereupon the fat boy turned deliberately toward him to say:

"Who's telling this story, me or you, George Rollins? If I am, then you just keep your hands off, and let me spin the yarn my own way. Don't expect me to be a whirlwind like you, for I ain't built that way; you're a match, and I'm a——"

"Tub; but never mind, Buster, please go on!" urged Josh.

"Well, of course George, he had his head stuck down close to his engine, watching every stroke it made, and couldn't see anything, only when he bobbed up every little while to tell me how to steer. And we went in fairly close to the shore. All at once, in a snug little cove behind a tongue of high land, I saw the boat.

She was anchored there; and first thing I saw was a young feller, just like that paper tells on, asittin' on the gunnel, and directin' a heavy-set chap, who was in jumpers, and looked like he was the engineer, deck hand and crew all rolled in one; he seemed to be mendin' the engine, or doin' something like that."

"But how was it you didn't call the attention of George to the boat?" asked Jack.

"It was cruelty to animals, that's what," echoed Josh, "because, think how joyful it'd make our chum to know that other people had their engine troubles as well as him?"

"Oh! he did tell me to look," admitted George just then, nodding his head, "but we were going so very fast, you know, that when I did get my head up it was just too late; I had a glimpse of the tip-end of some sort of boat in that cove he mentions; and then the bully little Wireless flipped by like a streak of light. Give you my word for it, fellows, we must have been flying along at the rate of nearly twenty miles per just then, current and all."

"Ah! rats!" ejaculated some one, and George did not know who had spoken, for the voice seemed to come from anywhere; but he just glared around, and then, shaking his head menacingly, he muttered:

"Better not be so plain next time, whoever said that; or it might bring on trouble. I c'n stand nearly anything about myself, but I won't hear my pet boat sneered at. Yes, it was all of twenty miles, understand!" and he again looked at Andy, Buster and Josh, as though daring any one to express another doubt.

"Well," said Jack, "here's some fun for us, now. If that description of the robber launch holds good; and Buster didn't see something that wasn't there, then it seems that we've got the thieves, and all their plunder, here within five miles of us right now. That's interesting, if true, as the papers say."

George began to grow excited.

"Get that gun of yours ready, Jack," the trusty old Marlin that has stood between us and trouble many a time!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet, as though in a frame of mind to go rushing off, pell-mell, on some reckless errand.

"What for?" asked the more cautious Herb.

"Why, don't it look like it's up to us to surround that pirate craft, and capture the bold burglars? Remember what we did once before when cruising down this same old Mississippi! And then again, there was that stunt we pulled off up among the Thousand Islands later on.

Ain't you meaning to take a hand in this thing, Jack?"

"Oh! I don't know," replied the other, carelessly. "I really don't see why we should be called on to take the place of a sheriff's posse every little while, and risk our precious lives. None of our folks that I know of have any interest in that looted bank up at Lawrence. And these kind of men are a dangerous proposition to handle, let me tell you. It would be a different matter if they broke in on us, and we got mixed up with the pair in spite of things. Then we'd just have to do our level best to capture the lot, and return the plunder to the cheering citizens of Lawrence."

"Hear! hear!" exclaimed Josh, pretending to clap his hands.

"But chances are, there'll be something of a reward offered for the apprehension of the thieves, and the safe return of the money," persisted George, although less strenuously than before.

"Well, what of that?" remarked Herb. "We ain't officers of the law, sworn to take all sorts of risks, just because some bad men get away with the funds of any old country bank, are we? Let 'em lock up things better, or hire a night watchman as the people in our town do

these days. Guess that goes, eh, Jack?"

"It certainly strikes at the root of the matter, as Professor Mapes would say, Herb," replied the other, quietly. "And then again, how do we know but what circumstances might arise to make us take a hand in the game? What more likely than that those same fellows would pick on this island to hide for a while, until the chase for them gets played out."

"Great brain, Jack!" cried Buster; "that's as true as smoke. Fellers like them are dead sure to know that Bedloe's Island 's got a bad name among honest folks; and that it'd be the boss hide-out for a couple of crooks that thought the officers might be rushin' up and down the river looking for 'em."

"Yes," added Herb, "and if they're as smart as we think they are, chances'd be they would have brought some paint along with 'em, too."

"Paint?" ejaculated Josh, "now, I c'n understand why Mr. Kedge, the boatbuilder who owns the shed where we kept our craft all winter, has to have that stuff around because he is in the business of fixing up all sorts—say, looky here. Herb, d'ye mean they'd want to change their boat from white to something else; is that your smart idea?"

Herb just nodded his head. He was not much

given to talk; but once in a while could be depended on to break in with a suggestion; and as a rule what Herb said was worth listening to.

"Fine!" exclaimed George, always ready to admit the fact when one of his mates really had a good idea.

"That's where your head is level, Herb, me bye!" declared Andy.

Jack smiled, and nodded, as though he considered it a point well taken. What more natural than that two smart rogues, trying to escape after committing such a bold robbery, and traveling in such a conspicuous boat, should think to prepare themselves with a pot of black or gray paint, with which to completely alter the appearance of their craft while hiding in some secluded spot, such as the island in the middle of the river afforded?

"Well, we can keep that idea in mind," Jack went on to say, and for one night set a watch, so that if they should happen along we'd know it."

"Huh! that makes me feel bad!" grunted Josh.

"What about?" demanded Buster.

"Here I've been counting on having the jolliest old camp fire the first night out you ever heard tell of. Been dreaming about it for a

week past, and seein' the flames shootin' up, with the sparks sailin' away out over the river; and here you go and throw cold water on that scheme right in the start. No camp fire tonight! Why, half of the fun'd be lost if we had to do the same thing every night, Jack, believe me."

Josh did not look very happy over the gloomy prospect; so Jack had to cheer him up the best way possible.

"It would only be for the one night, I reckon, Josh," he remarked, consolingly, "and if nothing happens before morning, why, after that you can make fires to the limit of the wood on the island, if only you don't burn us all out."

"Oh! well," Josh went on to say, "if all the rest of you look at it that way, course I've got to give in, because majority rules in this club, always. So let the fire die out if you want; I'm not going to bother putting another stick on it. Guess, with our sweaters and coats we c'n be warm enough as we sit here and talk."

"But all of us ain't got sweaters," exclaimed Buster, shiveringly, "'less somebody happens to have my blue moon one stickin' at the bottom of his bag. Now, don't everybody get mad at what I'm sayin', and turn on me savagely. Course I mean that it might a-got in there just

by accident like. And I'd be ever so much obliged if you'd look and see. A sweater is a mighty fine thing to have sometime, which right now is one of 'em; and when you don't find it, you feel as blue as that moon mine had on the breast."

Jack obligingly turned out all the contents of his bag, as did Andy and Herb, but Josh and George disdained to bother, saying they just knew it was no use, as they had a complete record of every lasting thing that was in their kits, and what was the need anyway; because a fellow as careless as Buster chose to leave one of his useful garments hanging somewhere in that boat builder's shed, for he was always forgetting to fasten the lockers of his boat when he left it, and everything like that; why should they be put to such a nuisance?

But Buster eyed the pair suspiciously, especially Josh. Truth to tell, it was on this individual that the burden of his belief fell; for was not the other continually trying to play a trick on him?

"All right, I'll know before a great while," Buster was saying to himself, as he lay back, having wrapped his blanket around his shoulders, in order to ward off the chill breeze that found its way to them, in spite of the fact that trees

and underbrush lay in dense masses between the northern end of the island and the spot which they had chosen for their camp.

They talked for a while, but by degrees it might have been noticed that for some unknown reason their voices gradually became more and more subdued; though if asked the cause for this hardly any one could have ventured an explanation. But possibly the subject they had recently been discussing, in connection with the chances of the two suspects making for the island, in order to lie there for some days, while they changed the color of their boat from white to black, may have had an influence on them all.

George was of course bothering his head about his one favorite pastime, and trying to puzzle out just how he could do something to his tricky engine in order to get more speed out of it, and at the same time stop its balky ways. Buster, on his part, was perhaps making a mental calculation concerning the amount of stores they had brought along; for he had a dim suspicion that before they wished to return home the stock would fall low, and the whole of them be put on short rations; a thing that would seem very much like a calamity to Buster.

And each one of the others seemed to have something on his mind; for presently absolute

silence had fallen on the little group. This was a most unusual occurrence, for as a rule several of the boys dearly loved to hear themselves speaking, and would air their views at the slightest excuse for doing so.

Jack, sitting there in what seemed to be a reverie, had his head against the trunk of a good-sized tree. This may have acted as a conductor of sound, for he seemed to catch a certain noise before any of the others did; and none of them could be accused of dull hearing, either.

"Hark, everybody!" he said suddenly, in a low, thrilling tone, that seemed to startle his companions, for everyone of them sat up straight.

"What did you think you heard, Jack?" whispered Buster, unconsciously lowering his voice.

"Something that sounded like the gurgling of water against the side of a boat, and voices in the bargain," replied the other. "There, if you try, you can get the same thing yourself. Seems to me there are push poles being used to turn a boat in against the shore up above here a little ways."

All of them strained their ears. A minute, two of them, passed, and they heard the swishing sounds Jack mentioned, each being followed by

a "plunk," as of a pole being dropped into the water for another push.

Then a voice, rather soft and melodious, came drifting to their ears.

"That'll do, Jenks; we can tie up to the shore here, all right, and in the morning look for a suitable cove to lay the boat in, while we get to work, and make the changes. Just think of it breaking down above this island again. Only for the old bunch of ground sticking out here in the river we'd have had to anchor. And, Jenks, I guess we might as well bury that box here as tote it any further, you know. I hate to leave a thing I cared for so much behind, but it can't be helped."

CHAPTER VII

THE TREASURE CACHE

"H'st! keep quiet!"

As Jack gave utterance to this whisper he set about gaining his feet without making any racket. And no sooner had he accomplished this than he started to stepping on what few red embers of the fire there chanced to be left; so that almost in a "jiffy," as Buster would have called it, the last glow had been effectually smothered, and there was no longer anything to betray the campers, unless the khaki-colored water-proof tent happened to show later on, should the moon rise.

They could hear the new arrivals making a landing, and talking about starting a fire, in order to cook some supper. The one who had the smooth voice, and whom they could easily believe to be the younger fellow Buster had mentioned as sitting at his ease, watching the heavier man work at the engine, George's style, declared that a meal on shore would not go bad.

"And," he added, the words coming plainly

to the ears of the listeners close by, "I don't believe there's any danger of our being come up with yet awhile. We've got too good a start on those fellows, to worry. Fact is, I wouldn't care if we had to stay here in this snug nook all of tomorrow, and get things fixed to suit us. Let 'em go on past, and hunt for us; we could slip by the lot the next dark night, and give 'em the merry ha! ha! Ain't that so, Jenks, old man?"

The other evidently said it was. He seemed to be a man of few words, and was quite satisfied to let his glib-tongued crony do most of the talking, which the younger man was well able to carry on.

Presently the glimmer of a fire through the brush and trees announced that they had indeed started a blaze, and were evidently preparing to cook supper. From certain conversation that followed concerning what this meal was to consist of Jack and his chums were quickly convinced that while this young fellow might be a bold and bad bank thief, he must have been brought up in the lap of luxury, judging from the fact that Jenks was instructed to have the "porterhouse steak and the mushrooms" for supper, together with coffee, and several other things that appealed to the appetites of hungry

cruisers, but which did not strike the boys that way, simply because their stomachs had been satisfied.

"Listen to that, would you?" whispered George in the ear of Jack, whom he happened to be very near at the time, "he said 'get it off the ice, and be careful to shut down the ice-box lid too!' Think of these bold buccaneers cruising with such a luxury aboard as an ice-box? Whew!"

"Not so loud, George, or they may hear you," warned Jack, although he himself thought that the fact was a remarkable one; but then the young chap must have been a high-stepper in his palmy days, before he took to evil ways; and possibly old habits clung to him still; so that, having the ready cash, he wanted to have all the luxuries going, along with him. Tenderloin steak and mushrooms sounded like it, that was certain. Perhaps they would be toasting each other at the end of the supper in champagne, at five dollars the bottle, Jack thought. When wicked men break into bank vaults, and make way with all the treasure they find there, surely they can indulge in any sort of extravagance for a short time afterwards.

The supper was finally cooked.

During this time the six boys had been slowly

and cautiously creeping up through the brush, and between the trees, it being their intention to see what the two fugitives, who were fleeing before the officers of the law looked like.

But they did not dare go very close, and hence most of what passed between the precious pair at the fire came to them only in a rumble of voices. But they could at least watch them and it was easy to understand that they seemed to be debating some point very seriously; for once the young fellow went aboard the boat, and when he came back he bore a box under his arm, which he carefully deposited on the ground near by. And how it thrilled every watcher as he saw this act, for there could be no doubt in the world but that this same chest was one containing all the treasure these bad men had taken from that Lawrence bank.

But the younger man, who was smooth-faced and boyish looking in fact, also took a folded paper from his pocket, which he opened and then both of them bent low down over the same, occasionally tracing along its surface, with a finger.

"It must be a chart of the river!" George took occasion to faintly whisper in Jack's ear, taking advantage of the murmur of the night wind among the branches of the trees overhead.

Of course this did not enlighten Jack any, since he had jumped at the same conclusion long before. But the fact of the others studying a map of the river's crooked course was highly significant, he thought. It told that they realized the danger they stood in of being overtaken, and that they meant to lay out a plan whereby they could elude pursuit.

Jack was studying the pair as he lay there back of the bushes.

He wondered whether the younger one, who seemed to be at the head of the dangerous combination, could be acting a part. This idea came to Jack because, as far as he was able to see, the other looked as though he hardly possessed brains enough to carry him through any ordinary trouble; and as to plotting such a bold thing as looting a country bank, why, Jack found it hard to believe he would be capable of it. But still, he knew very well that it is not always safe to judge from first appearances. While the skipper of the white power-boat might seem to be a bit of a "sissy," that might all be assumed for a purpose, to allay suspicion, a part he liked to play; and that should occasion ever call for a display of force and ugliness, the fellow might throw off that careless demeanor as one would an old glove, appearing in his real colors.

And while lying there, watching, and trying to pick up a sentence now and then, as the pair chanced to speak in a little louder tones, Jack busied himself in speculating what sort of chances they would have, did they finally decide to accept of the opportunity to close in on the two rascals, and bring about their arrest.

It would be taking a certain risk of course, and he did not want to expose his chums to any unnecessary chances for getting hurt; but all the same temptation loomed up large before Jack's eyes.

At any rate, he thought, it would do no harm to try and keep a watchful eye on the pair, and see what they were up to. Had he not in the beginning heard the leader say that they might as well bury the treasure on the island as carry it further with them. Of course they meant to come back again, and get possession of whatever that small box contained.

The thought of getting hold of the stolen bank funds and papers gave Jack a nice warm little thrill. He was only a boy, and yet he knew how splendid it was to return home, and hear the people cheering him, while the town band played "Lo, the Conquering Hero Comes." And once before had they been instrumental in recovering plunder that had been taken by

wandering yeggmen; which fact had helped swell the contents of the club's strong-box, and enabled the members to take several long and expensive trips.

Now those by the fire seemed to have finished their supper, for they arose, and the more boyish looking of the pair picked up the box again. It looked as though they might be about to hunt for some hidingplace, where it could be placed, and safely kept until it was wanted again.

"Get that sharp-pointed stick, Jenks," he remarked, pointing as he spoke, "that might do in place of a spade. You see, we didn't bring that sort of tool along, because we never thought we'd need one. But you ought to be able to scratch out a deep enough hole to cram this in. I hope nobody disturbs it again, that's all. I'd hate to know that was so. Now, come over this way, Jenks. It won't take any great length of time."

He spoke with a slight lisp that made him seem much more effeminate than might otherwise have been the case. And to the alarm of Buster the pair actually started toward the quarter where the six lads were flattened out as close as they could get to the ground.

But then the shadows lay thick, and besides,

before there was any real danger of discovery they heard him say again:

"I imagine this ought to do as well as anywhere, Jenks, just behind this bush, you notice. Now, see how you can root out the earth with that stick and your hands. I should think that a hole some fifteen or eighteen inches deep would be enough. There, it seems to work all right, doesn't it, Jenks?"

The heavy-set man said that it did, and continued to labor on, throwing the dirt out of the cavity he was making, by a liberal use of the sharp-pointed stick, then following it up by scooping with his bent hands.

But not a thing did the aristocratic partner in the team seem to do in order to assist. He must be the recognized brains of the crowd, and as such was entitled to sit by, and give orders in a rather supercilious way, while the other did all the real hard work.

When Jenks had scooped out a hole that he thought deep enough, he paused to wipe his brow with a red bandanna handkerchief. Meanwhile the other carefully laid the box in the cavity.

"It fits first-rate, Jenks," he announced, "and now you can cover it up again. Just push the earth in, you know, like that," and with the

toe of his shoe he managed to cause some of the dirt to fall upon the top of the box.

When presently Jenks seemed to have patted down the disturbed earth the other spoke again.

"We want anybody that comes meddling around here to think that some one has been buried, and then they won't dare disturb things, you know, Jenks. So I'll just fix this stone at the head as though it marked a grave. There, what do you think of that, Jenks? Takes some brains to get up a cute little scheme like that, don't it, eh?"

Jenks apparently was an echo, for when the other took snuff he seemed to sneeze, as George could have expressed it. He immediately remarked that he thought it a very smart trick, did credit to the originator; and this pleased the other for he seemed to chuckle to himself.

Then the pair turned away, and went back to the neighborhood of the fire, where they settled down to enjoy the warm blaze; for as the night advanced the air was really becoming more and more keen, especially, as Buster thought, for any unfortunate fellow who had the bad luck to lose his warm sweater; for the sight of his comrades enjoying their woolen protectors only made Buster feel his loss the more.

Jack gave the signal for a retreat. He intimated in a few whispered words that there was something very important upon which they ought to have a consultation; and in order to do unheard they would have to go back to their camp.

CHAPTER VIII

JACK PLAYS SCOUT

"What's doing, Jack?" asked George, carefully, as soon as the whole six of them were well away from the vicinity of the other camp, and where they could safely converse, if only every one spoke in a whisper.

"We ought to talk things over a bit, and arrange what we want to do about this matter," Jack went on to say.

"But ain't we goin' to jump on that pair of scamps, and make 'em our prisoners?" complained Buster; and to hear his ferocious way of talking one might easily imagine that the fat boy was a fighter from the word go, when as a rule Buster would walk a mile to escape a rumpus, for he was by nature very peaceable.

"Wait and see what Jack's got up his sleeve, you fire-eater!" remarked Josh, scornfully.

"We know where they've gone and buried all the loot, anyhow," remarked George, as though that fact gave him particular satisfaction.

"And we c'n dig the same up at our convenience," added Herb.

"That is, if they don't change their minds before morning comes, and get that box up again," observed Jack, dryly.

At that there were several little grunts and exclamations, such as would indicate that the others did not relish being tantalized in such a fashion having the treasure-trove under their thumbs, only to see it snatched away again.

"Say, we oughtn't to let that chance slip us, Jack!" urged Josh.

"Them's my sentiments, too!" echoed George.

"Count me in," Herb remarked, quietly.

"Same here, arrah, by the token!" Andy ventured.

"There, Jack," spoke up Buster, exultantly, "everybody is of the same mind, that we just ought to do something or other right away, so's to get that stuff in our possession. It wouldn't matter so much if the thieves did get away, if only we could go sailing up to Lawrence, call the broken-hearted directors of the looted bank together, and then say: 'Here, gentlemen, are your lost securieties. Rest in peace! E pluribus unum!' Now Jack, don't say a word against it, but think up some way that we can get hold of that box."

"Oh! I've got all that figured out already, Buster," remarked the other, coolly.

"Then tell us who's going to creep up and dig for that box while the two robbers are sitting beside the fire, playing cards, because that's what they started to do when they went back."

"And 'Old Maid' it was, as sure as you live," remarked George, as if astonished. "Did you ever hear of two ferocious pirates playing such a harmless game as that before? I never did, for a fact, boys. They keep me guessing right along. That boy looks too green to be the rascal they say he is; but I guess he puts it all on to fool respectable folks. It helps him in gaining their confidence."

George could figure things out in fine style once he got going. The others, however, were not in any mood just then to try and decide what sort of a fellow that rather innocent young chap might turn out to be. They were more deeply interested in finding out what could be done about securing that hidden package in the box.

Already, no doubt, Buster, for instance, was seeing pictures of all manner of treasure snugly reposing in the box; and he could also imagine how his manly chest would swell with importance when, with his mates, of course, he entered the

stricken town of Lawrence, and astonished the directors of the bank by returning their lost securities and money.

And the others were possibly in the same boat, for they had active imaginations, one and all.

Jack had said the matter was already arranged in his mind; and if he would only hurry up and take them into his confidence, they would feel greatly obliged.

But then Jack did not mean to hold back just to aggravate his companions; that would have been too small a thing for him to attempt. He had only waited to hear what each one thought of the scheme, and then he went on to say something.

"Now you can see for yourselves," he began, "that it would be useless trying to take the whole bunch over there, and scratch that box up. One can do the business to a dot, and as I'm accustomed to scouting more than any of the rest, I hope you won't try to raise any objections if I say I'll do the job myself."

He waited to hear what they thought before making the first move in the direction of carrying his plan out. But then he might have known that not one objection would be raised against his scheme, for they had the fullest con-

dence in whatever he proposed at an and all times.

The silence that followed was dou less intended for consent; but Jack chose to consider it otherwise. He wanted an expression from each of his chums.

"George, how about it?" he asked.

"Why, I haven't the slightest objection," replied that worthy, readily enough.

"Josh, how about you?"

"Gosh! only too willing," came the answer.

And Jack put it up to each of the others, until every one had signified his readiness to accept the conditions.

"All right, then," said Jack, "that settles it for me. And now, watch me get busy, fellows."

He once more started into the brush. All this conversation had been carried on, of course, in undertones. From time to time they could hear the voices of the other pair raised above the ordinary not far away; or it might be a laugh came floating back to where the six boys crouched, quivering in every nerve with intense excitement.

Why, Jack thought, even the laugh of Slim Jim, the cracksman, was very deceptive, it sounded so boyish and natural; just as though he did not have a care or a worry in all the

world. He must be a pretty clever young chap if he could pretend to be such an innocent, when really he was such a desperate rascal—so that paper had stated.

Having quitted the company of his friends, Jack began to advance in the direction of the other camp. He needed no better guide than the glow of the fire they had burning over there on the shore; though very careful as he crept through the bushes to take a little different track than before, because he believed it would be apt to bring him closer to the bush behind which that pretended "grave" that was in reality a cache for stolen wealth, had been so roughly dug.

Once, as he raised himself to glance around, he found it possible to see beyond the camp fire, to the edge of the river, something that none of them had been able to do hitherto; and what should meet his eyes but a very jaunty gasoline launch, of a type that indicated more or less speed, since it was of narrow beam, and would doubtless have quite taken the eye of George Rollins.

Of course Jack chuckled a little when he saw the very significant fact that the boat was painted snow white, and had a nice red line along

the gunwale that gave the craft a rather distinguished look.

Again into his mind came the description which he had read out aloud from the fragment of paper, concerning the boat in which it was positive the robbers of the Lawrence bank had fled down the river. A white launch, nobby in appearance, and decorated with a red line. Why, what could be plainer than that? White launches were not so very common on that part of the Mississippi; and Jack could not remember ever having set eyes on one before that was marked with red as this one appeared to be.

He kept creeping along, making no more noise than an Indian warrior might; or perhaps one might say, a snake that can glide swiftly, yet with hardly the faintest rustle of the dead leaves.

If he did make an occasional little slip, they were not on the alert, as red braves might have been. Doubtless they had not the remotest suspicion that such a thing as peril threatened, or that an enemy was within miles of the island retreat to which they had come to hide, and make preparations for deceiving the posse of the sheriff, should they chance to meet later on the river.

No doubt the other five boys had climbed

trees or done something else so that they would be in a position to see him when he reached that particular bush, back of which the hole had been dug. They would not be human if they were going to allow this chance to witness the unearthing of the treasure pass without an effort to become spectators.

Jack found that the two beside the fire were making merry. He eyed them closely, and then shook his head, thinking that perhaps they might appear like desperate rogues to an expert sheriff, accustomed to dealing with rascals of every kind; but for his part he rather thought the boy was a spoiled son of a rich man, and Jenks some humble mechanic out cruising with the other. But of course, not being well posted in criminal matters, how could he, a mere tyro, be expected to be able to judge what people were, just because they laughed in such a care-free way. Slim Jim they said feared nothing on earth; slender and young as he was, he had laughed more than one sheriff to scorn; and snapped his fingers when traps were sprung only to find that he was missing.

Now Jack was drawing closer and closer to that bush. He had marked it well on the previous occasion, so that there could be no such thing as mistaking it. Yes, he recognized

every twig almost, so closely had he made a mental photograph of the bush when the two were planting their "swag" back of it, and talking about making it appear as though it were a grave.

If they just kept up that riotous game of "Old Maid" for ten minutes longer, Jack felt positive that he could have accomplished his errand, and left the mound nicely smoothed over as he found it.

Jack guessed that they would hardly feel so merry when they discovered that the treasure-trove had been opened, while they were not thirty feet away, and the box containing the stolen securities and the bank bills carried off; or if they did laugh it would be on the "other side of their mouths," as Buster might have expressed it in his humorous way.

Now he was doing even better, for he had to pass a little patch where the cover was rather slim and in order to successfully negotiate it he was compelled to flatten himself very much on the order of a flapjack or a pancake.

But then, they seemed to have no eyes for anything except the cards they were handling. Two more unsuspicious rascals it would be indeed difficult to find; at least that was Jack's idea.

There was a piece of great good luck, for his hand had actually fallen upon the identical stick with the sharp point which Jenks had used so successfully when he was digging the hole in which to bury the treasure box.

Of course Jack picked this up, for he believed he could make good use of it in his line of business just about that time.

And now he had gained the bush, so that his hand actually rested on the little mound of fresh earth. It gave Jack something of thrill to realize that he was so very close to all that amount of loot which these two scamps had taken from the poor depositors of the Lawrence bank; for if the institution failed the loss would fall partly on poor people.

But he lost no time in getting to work with that odd spade, fashioned from a stick. When he found that he had loosened the top earth, he started to dragging it away with his hands, boy fashion; using the palms as scoops.

So he quickly got down to where he could touch the flat top of the little box; and then burrowing alongside, he managed presently to unheave the same, dragging it out of the cavity.

Then Jack set to work to place several stones that he had noted close by, in place of the box, so that the mound would still be as high as ever

and look as it though it still contained the chest.

Once in every little while as he did this work, Jack would glance through the lower part of the bush in order to make sure that the two card players were still as much interested in their innocent game of "Old Maid" as before. But really he had little need to do this, because their loud laughter told the fact as plainly as anything.

Then followed the most difficult task of creeping back over the route he had taken to reach the place. It had been hard enough when he could watch those whom he looked on as enemies; but as now he had to go backwards part of the time, so as to know when to stop moving, and lie still, when he thought one of them glanced that way, it became doubly difficult.

But Jack had not been making an idle boast when he claimed to be a much better scout than any one of his five companions. Circumstances had allowed him in the past to have a certain amount of experience in this line, such as none of his boatmates could claim; and that was how Jack made such a success of his venture.

Now he had passed the crisis in his retreat and was able to move along faster, even getting

to his feet, and in a couching attitude leaving the hostile camp behind.

When he reached the spot where the dull-colored khaki tent stood under the tree he found his five chums awaiting him; and every one of them was bubbling over with both a desire to squeeze Jack's hand, while telling him in whispers what he thought of such clever work and at the same time filled with a burning curiosity to know if the securities and the stolen money could all be in that humble little box.

CHAPTER IX

OPENING THE STRANGE BOX

"Didn't you get it, Jack?" asked Josh, carefully, as the Commodore joined the eager group beside the tent. "We all near broke our necks a-tryin' to see; and I say you grabbed the box; but Buster here seems as set on it that you had to give up the job, because you got back so fast, Here, what d'ye think of that, Buster? See what he's a-carryin' under his arm, would you? It takes Jack to do things with a rush, and yet never have a breakdown!"

"Less noise, Josh!" cautioned Jack, "you forget who's so close by. Even if the wind does rattle the new leaves on the trees, and the water churn against the rocks on the shore, they might happen to hear you. Lower that sharp voice of yours when you say 'Told you so'!

All the same every one of his five companions seemed delighted with his success. Buster had to even put out his hand and touch the box, before he would actually be convinced. Buster, you see, was something of a Doubting Thomas; he might take other people's word on occasion;

but he preferred to actually know that things were so, from his own experience.

"Why, it is a box, sure as you live," he was heard to mutter, as though surprised that the whole thing did not turn out to be just a dream; and that he would soon wake up.

"And is it heavy, Jack?" asked George, anxiously.

"Oh! just so-so," answered the hero of the raid, as he passed the article in question around, so that everybody could get the heft of it, even Buster.

It was laughable to see the way the fat boy took hold of the little chest; but then each one firmly believed that it contained quite a little fortune, and consequently there was something of due reverence for wealth in his way of handling the thing.

"I bet you they'll be hoppin' mad when they find out it's been sneaked away from them after all their bully trouble in hidin' the same," ventired Buster.

"Yes, and to think of the cuteness of that fellow makin' out that it was going to be reckoned just a regular little grave," said George, with a chuckle. "Guess he thought that nobody would ever dare dig it up then, because

they say, it's sure a sign of bad luck to disturb a body."

"But what are we going to do now?" demanded Josh.

"Jack, darlint, ain't we a-goin' to open the box, and say for oursilves what lies inside?" asked Andy. "Sure, 'tis mesilf that'd loike tell fale with me own hands all the money it must contain. 'Tis a bank cashier I'm intindin' to be some foine day, and I loike nothin' better than to handle cash."

"Me too," echoed Josh.

In fact, that was just what every fellow must have been thinking about then; for they were pressing closely around Jack, who had once more taken the box into his charge.

"But how can we ever see anything when we ain't got a light, and don't dare start one for fear of being discovered?" remarked doubting George, who as a rule could far excel Buster in this particular of being skeptical.

"How about the stars; ain't they enough to let a feller see just a little?" asked Josh.

"Jack, what do you say?" came from Herb, willing to let the Commodore decide the question once and for all.

"First, let's sit down and try to keep quiet for a little while," responded the boy who had been

appealed to, "because, unless I miss my guess, we're going to have all the light we want to right away now."

As the others followed his example, and dropped upon the ground, pressing closely together, so that they could get their heads in a small circle, and be able to do some more talking, Buster was heard to say, appealingly:

"Now, just what do you mean by that remark, Jack, I'd like to know? Where would we get so much light? Anybody got a flash torch along? No, that's where we made a big mistake, you see, forgettin' so important a thing. Speak up, Jack, and let's know all about it, please."

"Even if we did forget," replied Jack, "we're going to have the biggest torch you ever heard tell of, pretty soon; and that'll give us all the light we want, take it from me, Buster."

The fat boy moved a little uneasily.

"Whee! I hope now, Jack, it ain't anything like the woods on fire you got in mind," he asked, with a sudden vein of alarm in his voice; for Buster had once passed through a very unpleasant experience while in a blazing forest, and often had bad dreams on that account.

Josh made a scornful sound, which was a favorite habit of his whenever he wished to con-

vey the idea that he looked on some remark of the stout boy as indicating an unsound mind.

"And us out here on a measly little old island in the middle of the old Mississippi, at that?" he observed, caustically, and then wound up with another "Huh!"

Jack at another time would have been amused to hear these two go at it, hammer and tongs; but the present was hardly an appropriate time for any sort of a dispute or even discussion.

"Suppose you fellows take a look around," he remarked, "and perhaps after that you won't need to ask me where I'm going to get my torch."

After all it was sharp-eyed Andy who made the discovery.

"Arrah! and sure 'tis the moon he manes!" exclaimed the Irish lad.

"The moon," echoed George, "now wherever do you see any signs of that same thing, I'd like to know?"

"Would you look at George, starin' as hard as he can right into the west?" mocked Josh. "Since when has the moon taken to risin' across the river, George? Reckon you're a little mixed in your directions, ain't you? Been bobbing over that engine of yours so much you

get off your base. That's right, turn your head around, and you'll see what Jack means."

There, somewhere not far from in the east the sky was brightening along the horizon which they could manage to see beyond the tumbling water of the river. Without a doubt it was the coming moon, sending a few shreds of her silvery light in advance to paint the way.

"I c'n see the tip of her face right now, apeekin' above the line of trees away over there on the shore," announced Josh, with a slight vein of exultation in his partly suppressed voice.

"That's roight!" agreed Andy.

As they stood there and looked sure enough the edge of the moon began to slowly creep into sight. At first it seemed just for all the world like a silver pencil marking a bright eyebrow above the horizon; but gradually this extended, growing more pronounced all the while, until even a child could tell that it was the moon making her nightly bow to the darkened world below.

Not another word was said until every part of her now sadly battered disc had come into view. The moon was not near so beautiful as on the third night previous, when full; but there was still a deal of light shining from that

yellow glove hung up there in the heavens like a huge lantern.

"She'll do the business all right, Jack—!" ventured Buster, just as though he had been rather uncertain up to then.

"You just bet she will, bully old moon!" declared George, who was possibly more inclined to be sentimental than any of the six boys.

"Say when, Jack," urged Josh; meaning by this that he hoped the other would not think the time had arrived to rip the cover off the little box, so that they could all have a peep at its glorious contents, before it was stowed safely away aboard one of the motor boats.

Jack looked a little doubtingly at the moon, just hanging above the horizon. "Not near as much light as she'll be giving when she gets higher," he said, softly; "but then, I guess we can't wait for that. You fellows would just die with anxiety if you couldn't see pretty soon.

But while Jack was saying these caustic words, of course he did not mean anything. Why, he was just about as keen on wanting to see the contents of the box as any one of his chums. That was only a boy's way of expressing himself.

Had there been need of caution Jack could

have knocked the lid off that box in short order, by taking the camp hatchet, and making use of it. The job was not apt to prove quite so easy when he found himself compelled to simply pry with the sharp edge of the said little axe.

He worked busily for several minutes, while, the balance of the boys hovered over him, making various suggestions, and even wanting to show Jack how it ought to be done; for of course every fellow considered that he could accomplish the task better than any one else.

But Jack knew what he was about, and so he declined to hand over his job to the next one. He had managed by dint of pressure to get the edge of the blade inserted under what seemed to be the lid of the box, and was now engaged in prying it up, a little at a time.

"Don't bother Jack so, you fellows," warned Herb, who was apparently quite staisfied with the way things were going. "Leave him alone, and he'll fix it all right. He always does, you know. There you c'n see the lid's coming right along. Another pry like that, and you'll have her, Jack. Eureka! there she rises, boys! He's done it!"

Jack calmly bent the lid fully back, and then pried it loose, so that it fell over on the ground. Then he took the little box up in his arms and

turned to get the full light of the low moon.

"Jack first, fellers!" cautioned Josh, "don't you all crowd the mourners so. Let him take a peek, and then the rest of us c'n feast our eyes on all that bully money and stuff. Keep back, Buster, you ain't the first in line; that's George, and me, I'm second choice. Look at the stuff Jack's a-pullin' out, would you? Seems like rags or somethin' like that, to me. Reckon they just stuffed the top of the box full to keep the coin from rattling around like. What's ailing Jack, fellers? See him a-starin' in like he seen a ghost. Gee! but it must be a great sight, all that boodle from the bank, to make our partner stare like that. George, get a move on you, and step up. You're next, you know. No crowdin', Buster. Keep your place in line, can't you?"

Jack was indeed standing there, and staring into the opened box as though he had received something of a shock; but over his face there began to creep a semblance of a smile, or a grin, or something of that character, as he held out the box for George to take his turn next.

CHAPTER X

DISAPPOINTMENT

"Oh! my stars!"

That was what George said, in a faint voice, as though he was very nearly overcome, after taking his look into the box, Jack holding the same most obligingly all the while.

Of course, even this did not have any effect upon Josh, who was next in line. In fact, if anything, it served to spur him on to all the sooner get his peep-in; wondering at the same time what it could be.

Buster heard Josh give a gasp, as he bent his head down. It must be something wonderfully fetching, to influence all of the boys in that queer way. And consequently Buster, impatient for his turn, actually put out his hand and shoved Josh out of the way.

No sooner had he looked than he too gave evidence of being nearly overcome.

"Great governor! somebody hold me. I'm going to faint!" was what Buster whispered; and this suspicious remark made Andy want to get out of line, only that Herb, coming last,

would not allow such a thing, but actually shoved the other up until he just had to do his duty and look.

Andy threw up both hands as he exclaimed, perhaps in a louder voice than was really discreet:

"Tare and ounds! Be the powers, 'tware a grave afther all, so it was!"

"What's that?" quivered from the lips of Herb, as he now hesitated in turn.

"Come on, don't hang back like that, Herb; you've just got to see!" ventured Josh, laying hold of the other's sleeve, and commencing to drag him forward.

It was like the boy who jumps into the pond so early in the spring that he is nearly frozen stiff; but whoever heard of him confessing to the fact; while his comrades hesitate on the bank he puts on the most angelic face possible, and declares that the water is "as warm as anything;" until he has coaxed them all in; for misery loves company, they tell us.

So Herb had to do his duty, and look.

"Good gracious, why, it's only a little puppy dog after all!" broke from his white lips, as he stood there and stared.

"That's just what it is," replied Jack. "And after all, that fellow spoke what he meant, when

we thought he referred to another sort of treasure. This must have been his pet."

"But Jack darlint," broke in Andy, "phat d'ye think he wanted to bury this ki-yi on the island for at all, at all?"

"What for?" echoed Buster, before Jack could say a word, "why, because the little beast had gone and kicked the bucket—died on him—you know."

"Must have been a pet dog," suggested Josh, "'cause we heard him say he felt bad at putting the thing underground. Say, Jack, d'ye think now, the little beast could a got hurt that night when they broke into the Lawrence bank and looted it? P'raps somebody fired at the thieves and hit the pup; or it might a got hold of rat poison somehow."

"Quit your guessing, Josh; what does it matter to us how the poor little beast came to his end?" demanded George, who had a liking for dogs himself, and seemed to feel less hilarity than any of the rest, once the shock of the discovery, and their own disappointment wore away.

Jack was for taking it as a joke at his expense.

"Say, just think of that splendid sneak of mine wasted," he remarked, sadly. "And all

for this, too. I've got half a notion to crawl back again, and bury the poor little wretch over, just to pay for making such a mistake."

"But hold on," Herb observed, "this doesn't mean that the two over yonder ain't what we took 'em to be, does it? There's the white boat, you know, with the red trimming; didn't Jack tell us he could see it plain enough anchored close to the shore? Just because they put a little pet dog underground don't make 'em better, I reckon, eh, Jack?"

Jack did not reply immediately. The old doubts were commencing to work double time with him. He was beginning to question the truth of their solution of the problem. Again he could see the face of the younger fellow, who had seemed to be hardly more than a boy. Was that affectation only assumed? Might it not be a part of the nature of the fellow after all? Was he a desperate crook, who was able to put on an air of innocence; or could it be possible they had made a tremendous mistake, and that he was a pampered son of some rich man, cruising in his fine motorboat, with a mechanic as crew to do the rough work, while he played his part as skipper of the craft?

Yes, Jack was now in the Doubting Thomas class. He shook his head, and seemed to be

trying to figure things out, as he laid the box on the ground, and covered it temporarily with the lid which had taken him so long to pry off.

"And if they are the bank thieves," Herb went on to say, "what d'ye suppose they could have done with all that stuff they took away? Think they buried the same before they got here to this island, Jack, or could it still be on board the little white boat right now?"

"Oh! yes, that's the stuff; how about it, Jack?" George went on to add.

"We sure did fall all over ourselves in making this blunder," admitted Josh, "and it's up to us now to get busy and try to make things square."

"Of course," said Jack, slowly, as though he might be revolving this last idea in his mind, "that's possible. If these are the right men, and they've not got rid of the plunder up to now, why, it stands to reason it would be somewhere on board, that's right."

"But seems to me, Jack," remarked Herb, suspiciously, "you're beginning to hedge a heap. Just a little while ago you were dead sure these fellows must be the two robbers. Now you say 'if they are.' How's that? Didn't you see their boat, and wasn't it just what that

newspaper account said the suspicious craft looked like."

"Boys, I admit all that," the other went on to say, "but if you stop and think, the article in the paper didn't say positively that the white boat belonged to the bold bank thieves—only that it had been seen hanging around, like it might be in hiding, and they thought it must have for a crew the two yeggs who broke into the Lawrence bank. There's some difference, you'll admit between making a positive statement, and just guessing things."

"Well, for one, I still believe they are the men that are wanted," said George, to prove that he had not been convinced otherwise.

"I think so, too," added Josh.

"And for one now," added impetuous George, boldly. "I'd like nothing better than to sneak that boat of theirs away while they sleep. What d'ye say to that, fellows, ain't it worth considering?"

For a minute no one replied. The audacity of the proposition staggered them, it seemed; and yet as is nearly always the case with boys, it appealed to the love of mischief and the daring that somehow seems to be a part of their nature.

"Say that would be a great stunt, now," said Josh.

Buster drew a long breath as he went on to say:

"George, you ain't so very bad a hand at laying out a game after all. Whee! just think how they'd rub their eyes, and stare, when they woke up in the morning, and went to look for the jolly old white boat, which wouldn't be there."

George began to feel his importance. After all, Jack could not have a monopoly of engineering things; once in a great while some other fellow was apt to have an inspiration; and it seemed to be his turn just then.

"You seem to think well of my little scheme?" he remarked, proudly.

"Jack, how do you feel about it?" asked cautious Herb, not noticing that the other had as yet made no comment; which, in some boys might have signified that they were feeling jealous; but everybody knew Jack Stormways could not allow such a thought to enter his head.

"Do you want to know my idea, George?" asked Jack, frankly.

"I sure do," came the reply.

"Well, I'll tell you," the other went on to say. "It would be a great stunt to carry off this white boat, if only we were sure the parties are the robbers. But stop and think what

we'd be up against if they were innocent parties. Why, they could have us arrested for stealing their craft; and what excuse would we have to offer? The old gag about not knowing it was loaded wouldn't pass in court. We'd get a heavy fine, even if it wasn't worse. This is a time when it'll pay us to be sure before we go ahead."

"Huh! p'raps you're right, Jack," grunted Josh, already beginning to weaken before this sort of logic.

George did not open his mouth, but he was always willing to listen to what Jack had to say; for the other never gloried in showing any of his comrades up as being in the wrong.

"But the principal thing of all, and which we'd have to find out first, before thinking of hooking the boat, would be to know whether they expect to sleep ashore, or aboard," Jack went on to say.

At that Buster tittered.

"Think what a cheeky thing it'd be," he remarked, softly, "if we ran away with the boat, and then found that we'd kidnapped a couple of innocent ducklings, one of them mamma's darling boy! Whew! mebbe we wouldn't feel cheap though!"

"Oh!" said Jack, "then you've been thinking

that this terrible Slim Jim, the dandy hobo, might be somebody else, have you, Buster? Well, I tell you what we ought to do, boys—hang around, and watch that pair some more. If they begin to get the camp ready as though they meant to stay ashore tonight, we can talk it over again, and decide whether we'll play George's trick or not with the boat. How?"

"I say leave it that way," ventured Josh, now completely won over.

"I'm agreeable," George hastened to say, for he was not altogether unreasonable in anything save that troublesome engine aboard his Wireless; and in that quarter he would never take advice from any one until in difficulties; he knew it all.

And so it was arranged.

They could creep up, and from their old place of observation keep an eye on the two who were under suspicion; and in this way something might arise whereby they would be able to tell definitely whether they would be justified in going to extremes, or ought to keep their hands off.

Even as they started to once more advance toward the spot where the camp fire burned, they began to hear a strange clanking sound, as of steel smiting steel, that gave them new cause for wonder.

CHAPTER XI

BUSTER HAS A SHOCK

"What in the wide world's that?" asked Buster Longfellow, as they came to a halt in order to listen.

"Sounds like somebody's started a blacksmith shop over here on the island, that's what!" remarked Josh.

"Mebbe they're counting over the ducats they've stolen," suggested George; but the idea of silver dollars making such a loud sound as this as they jingled in a heap, was really so ridiculous that even Buster chuckled in derision; whereupon George had to hastily add "joke!"

"Tell you what I think," observed wise Herb. "You know they were having some engine trouble a while back; and I reckon that mechanic fellow has got busy fixing it up. The only thing that surprises me is that George here didn't recognize something mighty familiar in the racket. He's forever making it himself, so if I didn't know he was alongside, I'd take my affidavy that was him right now."

"Huh! think yourself smart to make fun of

my twelve-horse power engine, don't you Herb?" he started to say, and would doubtless have delivered himself of considerably more along the same lines, only that Jack broke in by observing:

"All the same, Herb is right, there; for the man is aboard the boat and working away at the motor. He's some machinist, believe me, from the way he goes about things. And there's the other one going aboard too; wonder what that means?"

Watching they presently saw the younger fellow come in sight again, and step to the bank of the island from the power tied-up and anchored boat.

"'Got an armful of blankets?" asserted Josh, immediately.

"That settles one thing, then," came from George.

"Yes," they're going to make camp ashore, and pass the night on firm ground," Jack admitted. "Perhaps they like the change, as we do. Plenty of times when you just have to sleep aboard the boat, you know."

"And p'raps," George went on, "we'll be trying out my little bit of a scheme, after all."

"Nobody knows," Jack assured them.

They made themselves as easy as possible,

and took up their vigil, not knowing how long it might last.

Back and forth the younger fellow went, until he had carried a great lot of articles, calculated to induce a comfortable night's rest ashore. Then he started in to fix things to suit him, taking a part of the blankets.

"That settles it," whispered Jack, to Herb, who was next, "he's a greenhorn, as far as camping goes."

"Yep, guess he is," assented the other, although, if put to the test, Herb might have found it difficult to explain on what he founded his belief.

"See where he's gone and arranged his blankets," Jack continued. "There, he's trying to see how they feel; and would you look at his head toward the fire. No experienced camper ever does that, because it's his feet that get cold in the night, so he always has them closest to the fire."

"Sure!" agreed Herb, just as though he had always known that fact, when in truth it had never occurred to him before.

"He fetched some grub with him the last time he came!" whispered George, on the other side of Jack, "and if anybody asked me what that stood for I'd be likely to say it meant they

were going to stay on dry land a little while, till they get that engine working that's what."

"Well, that isn't going to be long," remarked Josh in turn as there came a series of explosions from aboard the boat, that sounded as regularly as clockwork. "He's got her working now, all right, I guess."

"Then he must be a crack-a-jack of a me-mechanic," observed George, thoughtfully, as though a vague idea had come into his head that it might pay him to get such a man to look over his engine, given the chance.

"But I haven't seen any paint—yet," remarked Buster, obstinately.

"Well, what would they want to get busy with that for at night time?" Josh asked him. "If they put in tomorrow hiding here on the island you'll see enough of paint slingin' to suit you, Buster, believe me. They'll want to get the boat partly up out of the water on some skids, using block and tackle to drag her; and then so change her looks that nobody'll recognize her as the same suspicious white boat that took the bank's cash away."

After that they fell silent for some time, meanwhile continuing to watch the two who were still objects of concern, not to say suspicion. The one ashore had crawled under

his blankets as though bent on getting fixed cozy for the night. He came out and went back three separate times. Now it was to arrange his covering a little differently; and again it was to draw the blankets back and dig out a root that must have started to hurt his back while lying there, as roots have a failing for doing with campers, especially the big gnarly ones that have a knob on them—every boy knows that without being told.

About the time he finally seemed fixed comfortably with the fire burning low not very far from his head the second one came ashore.

"How is she now, Jenks; I heard you give her a trial spin?" came a voice from among the collected heap of blankets which the intended sleeper had drawn over him.

"Workin' tip-top, sir, right now," replied the other; and somehow it seemed to the listening Jack that there was a vein of deference in his tones such as might hardly be expected to be disclosed when one cracksman addressed another, no matter if it was a Slim Jim, and a recognized master of the art of thievery.

"Then we've got that thing off our hands, Jenks," the unseen one went on, every word reaching the ears of the listening boys, because

he called out loudly, thinking his voice might be muffled by the blankets, "and we can take it easy tomorrow, with the other job, if we conclude to hide until darkness comes around again."

"That's right, sir, so we can," assented the other, beginning to shift his blankets and make up his bed in the regulation way.

There was no more said.

Jack, watching Jenks, immediately decided that the man must have been in the open more or less, for he seemed to know just how to go about things; and his head was not toward the fire either, when he lay down. Still, he did not attempt to arrange the blaze so that it would keep up for many hours; perhaps he thought that since the other had incautiously placed his head that way it would be folly to keep the heat going, so as to roast him out.

And then at last both seemed to have successfully arranged themselves, for there was no longer any wriggling movements of the blankets that might stand for uneasiness.

"Think they're asleep, Jack?" queried Herb, softly, as he touched the other gently on the arm.

"If they ain't they'll soon be," muttered

George, who had overheard the question and took it upon himself to answer.

"Wonder how much longer this game's goin' to keep up?" grumbled Josh; "my right leg's nigh paralyzed as it is, and I'm gettin' a crick in my back, Jack, what's the best word?"

For reply he received a low warning hist that somehow thrilled Josh, and possibly some of the others as well. Immediately every one fastened his eyes on the two bundles of blankets near the dying fire, as though expecting to see some upheaval in that quarter; but nothing of the kind took place.

"What was it, Jack?" whispered Josh, wondering why the other had given that low warning, when there seemed to be no sign of trouble in the hostile camp.

"Something moving over yonder in the bushes; watch sharp, to the right, now!" was what came from the Commodore.

"Gee! mebbe a wild animal goin' to raid the camp for grub!" Josh suggested.

"More 'n likely the same hungry guy that carried off that ham of ours, that's what," Buster was just heard to say, deep down in his throat.

Then they lapsed into silence again; though all this talking had been conducted in such low

tones, that a short distance away any one would have taken it for granted that it could only be the night wind whispering through the branches of the trees overhead, not yet fully covered with the fresh green leaves that came with the spring.

Yes, there certainly was something moving over there, in the quarter which Jack had indicated. They could see the bushes beginning to bend again, but very slowly, as though the intended intruder tried to exercise great care, not meaning to arouse the sleepers.

Man or animal, they could not say immediately, for even when they first caught sight of the moving figure it was crouched so low that it could pass for either one or the other, in that uncertain light.

Every eye was riveted on it, that can be set down as positive. In fact, just at that minute all of the watchers seemed to be holding their very breath, such was their natural condition of suspense, as well as deep interest.

"Is it a panther, Jack; and have you got your Marlin ready?" Josh whispered in the other's ear.

The only answer Jack made was to kick Josh on the shins; with that unknown thing creeping

forward it seemed no time to be asking foolish questions. Josh evidently understood, for he hushed up immediately.

But then that might have been because all of them saw about this time that it was a man and not an animal, for he had raised his head, in order to take a sharp look toward the spot where the fire glimmered and the two figures were huddled in the piles of blankets.

Possibly the low murmur of Josh's voice had reached the ears of the intruder, so as to arouse a slight suspicion; but if so, this must have been lulled to sleep again immediately he found that neither of the inanimate figures had changed position.

But when the man thus partly arose it disclosed the fact that he was a heavyset sort of a fellow, wearing a cap and that his face was partly covered with a beard. It did something more than this. When he stretched his neck to see the better a portion of his body was exposed to view.

Now, it was nothing strange that this unknown prowler wore a sweater, or that this was a fine soft gray woolen sweater, of the kind used by automobile tourists in these days, buttoning down the front; but it certainly nearly gave

Buster Longfellow heart disease when he discovered on the breast of that same garment the wonderful blue moon that he had so often described as marking his lost present, which he had been suspecting poor innocent Josh of having purloined!

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN WITH THE BLUE MOON SWEATER

Now, it happened that Jack had made this astonishing discovery even before Buster could have done so, for he was so much quicker than the fat boy to observe things, and never had there been a sweater made just like that one with the blue moon on its front.

Jack also knew that the chances were Buster would be apt to say something out loud in his astonishment at seeing his lost property on the back of a prowler, possibly the very man who had stolen their intended supper.

And as the leader of the motor boat boys was as quick as a flash to act, no sooner had this idea entered his brain than he stretched out his arm actually across Herb, and reaching the fat boy, managed to clasp his hand squarely over his mouth.

From the fact that Buster's lips were twitching at that very second, it seemed evident that he had just been on the point of giving vent to his feelings by some such blunt expression as:

"Well, would you see the nerve of that, now?"

Instead he was brought to a sense of the necessity for complete silence; and as Buster was not at all devoid of common sense he managed to bottle up his excitement somewhat.

But now the man had dropped down on all fours again, and seemed to be moving along with considerable dispatch. Jack had seen that the fellow had eyes only for the motionless figures at the fire; and also that something approaching a grin had broken out on his heavy face when he saw how inanimate they were.

His movements were certainly suspicious, and those that would indicate an intention of thievery. Certainly no honest man would come stealing into a strange camp in this fashion.

What could he want? If this were the same rogue who had made way with the food Josh placed on that flat stone, perhaps he believed that it would be just as well to strike while the iron was hot, and there seemed to be abundant supplies lying around loose. If he were a shiftless fisherman, such as sometimes used to gather here on this island, Jack had been told, why, he might believe that all was fish that came to his net; and seeing the food that had been carried ashore, lying so temptingly around, canned stuff, and all that abundant means could supply, he was now bent on making a haul.

That was Jack's first idea, for the man seemed to be crawling toward the pile of groceries when discovered. But now he had shifted his course somewhat, so that it was at a tangent with his first line of advance. Was he simply trying to avoid contact with the sleepers, or did he have some other reason for altering the direction of his coming?

Jack's interest began to increase by leaps and bounds. He realized that perhaps the intruder might be looking forward to something of far greater advantage than a mere carrying off of eatables. Yes, he was heading now toward the shore where the white motor boat was tied up! And Jack suddenly recollected that one of his companions had suggested that the robbers kept their treasure-trove aboard the craft. That was after the discovery of the hoax connected with the buried box.

But then how could this rough fellow have any suspicion concerning the plunder taken from the bank? He surely could not, and must be intending to go aboard simply under the belief that fatter pickings were to be found on the little vessel just then totally unguarded.

Now he was at the river bank, with nothing to interfere with his plan of boarding the tied-up boat. Of course his progress had been fol-

lowed by every one of the six pair of eyes belonging to the boys hiding in the bushes, and it would be needless to say that by now all of them guessed what his destination was.

Jack felt a pair of kunckles industriously digging at his side which he knew must belong to George. The impulsive one was in this mute fashion voicing his desire to know what Jack meant to do about it; and doubtless hoping that they would be given permission to make some sort of move after the thief had fully vanished over the side of the white boat.

But Jack paid no attention to the nudges. He was thinking just then what a queer old mix-up the whole affair was getting to be; when one robber attempted to ply his trade upon another of the same sort.

Now they could see the shadowy form passing from the bank on to the gunwale of the boat. The fact that the side of the craft chanced to be so very white did much to throw the climbing figure out in relief. Then he disappeared and everything was as it had been; only they knew an intruder had boarded the boat, and must be rummaging around in search of something which doubtless he expected to find there.

Still the two near the dying camp fire had shown no sign of life. They seemed to be

sound asleep, and utterly unconscious of the fact that an enemy had crept into their midst, bent on pillage.

Jack thought fast, and indeed, there was good reason why he should do so. Should they attempt to warn the two nestled there amidst the blankets, and put them wise to the fact that they were in danger of being robbed? That would only disclose their presence to the fugitives from justice, as they had been terming the owner of the white boat, and his companion Jenks. And if they were the men who had looted the bank up at Lawrence, why try and save their ill-gotten plunder?

Really, it would appear to be just as well that they let this adroit second thief get the treasure in his possession, and then proceed to take it from him in turn. Besides, it might be policy to reduce the number of those against whom the boys would have to pit themselves; and one must be reckoned just the half of two.

That was the way Jack found himself putting it, as though he had to reduce the whole thing to argument. And it was surprising how many different things could force themselves into his mind in just a brief space of time. He could imagine the last creeper to have come safely off the white boat, with the treasure in his pos-

session, perhaps even walking close by where they crouched; then would be given a signal that must result in his being attacked from every quarter at once; and surely with six of them to assist, he must be easily pulled down.

But wait, there was no need of getting so far afield, when the man seemed to be still busying himself aboard the white motor boat some way or other. While they could not see him, it was noticed that the narrow-beamed boat was shaking more or less, as though some one were moving about aboard.

Buster must recognize a very familiar movement in this, because there was the cranky Wireless, always ready to accommodate itself to the activities of any one who had the misfortune to pass any length of time on board, either as passenger, crew or skipper.

Should that heavy-set man, called Jenks by the other, chance to awaken about this time, perhaps there would be something doing speedily, for he had all the looks of a stayer in a fight, and once he detected the presence of the interloper, woe be to him. But there had not been the slightest movement to either of the sleepers; and if the intended robber of thieves was to be balked in his designs, it looked as though Jack

and his chums would have to prove themselves equal to the occasion.

And so Jack's conclusion seemed to be that it might pay them to get somewhat closer to the river bank, so that should the unknown finish his work aboard, and start to make his escape, they could head him off the better.

It was not really necessary for him to communicate all this to each one of his chums. When they saw him start to make a move they would understand what was intended, and govern themselves accordingly.

Jack raised himself to his hands and knees. Then he commenced to work his way along, with the tied-up boat as his ultimate destination.

Just as he had anticipated, every one of the other fellows started in to imitate his actions. All they wanted was an example, and they were ready to follow suit. You have seen the whole flock of sheep follow the bell wether over a low fence; and that was about the same way George and Josh and the rest did right then and there.

All went smoothly for a certain length of time; perhaps as much as three or four minutes may have passed along. Then something happened that was certainly not down on the bills; and coming so unexpectedly must have given the boys a severe shock.

Without warning there burst upon the night air a loud and sonorous "ker-chew!" Why, it was deep-toned enough to have awakened the Seven Sleepers of old; and certainly the precious pair over there by the fire could not help but be electrified by the explosion.

It was not a thunder clap, though some of the creeping boys might have so considered, when first it broke upon their startled hearing. No, it was only Buster Longfellow sneezing.

This was an old weakness of Buster's. He was wont to sneeze on any and all occasions, and many times in his past history had he been brought to a knowledge of the fact that it was a habit calculated to get a fellow into all sorts of trouble. Remember that time he threatened to upset George's boat when one of these fits happened along? Well, there were now even more dire possibilities in store for the unlucky originator of that tremendous sneeze, than he cared to look in the face.

In the first place it aroused the two at the fire. They could be seen suddenly sitting up straight, and looking all around them, as though half expecting to discover strangers in the camp, who according to their calculations could have no business there.

Then a head was seen to rise hurriedly above

the gunwale of the white motor boat, showing that the fellow who had gone aboard, had been disturbed in the midst of whatever he was doing. Of course it was to be expected that he would spring over the side, and make a streak for it, intending to find shelter in the covert of nearby bushes.

Nothing of the sort happened.

On the contrary, while he did immediately expose himself in full view it was to carry out an entirely different line of energy.

Jack was just in the act himself of standing up and directing his comrades as to what they should do in order to cut off the other's escape, when he saw there was going to be nothing doing in that line.

For the man had leaned quickly over the side, and made a sweep with his hand at the little hawser holding the boat snug against the bank. He must have had an exceedingly sharp-bladed knife there, for it cut through that rope as though the cable were made of sand. And at the same moment the white motor boat started to swing free from the shore of the island.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RIVER PIRATE

It was all done as quick as a flash, almost.

The unknown man aboard the white motor boat had no sooner sliced the rope apart, thus allowing the craft to swing free and begin moving with the current, always pulling steadily at it while lying there, than he did something more.

"Look at him with the push-pole!" whooped Josh.

"Hey! hold on there! That ain't your boat. I'll have the law on you for stealing!" cried out the dapper young chap, who had thrown his blankets aside, and was standing there, shaking his fist after the bold trespasser.

The big man with him, who had done all the work on the engine earlier in the night, Jenks, started to rush toward the landing, as though he believed in deeds rather than words. But the fellow who was so coolly making off with their boat laughed harshly as he plied the push-pole briskly.

Already had the boat gained a certain mo-

mentum, and if allowed to continue as it was going for another full minute, would be lost to the owner.

Jack and his five companions had not held back all this time either. They were at a disadvantage, being much further away from the scene of action than those who had been sleeping near the remains of the fire. Consequently there was little chance for them to reach the spot before the man had accomplished his evil task, and completed the seizure of the white boat.

Jenks rushed down the shore like a mad bull. From his actions it seemed as if he contemplated jumping into the river, and forcing his way out to the stolen boat in spite of everything.

Indeed, he did push into the water, which happened to be rather shallow at that point, and was making a gallant attempt to board the boat, when suddenly the man dropped his pole, and held something out toward Jenks that glistened in the moonlight.

"Keep back or I'll shoot!" they heard him call out.

Jenks possibly did not believe him, for he kept rushing through the water still; whereupon there came a sharp report, and a flash of flame.

"Oh!" cried Buster.

Jenks had pulled up short, and seemed to be wavering.

"That was only a warning," the man aboard went on to say, angrily; "but try it some more, and I'll aim for keeps. You get me, don't you?"

All this was plainly seen because of the bright moon. And while they stood and stared, they heard the crank of the engine worked, and immediately the rapid sound of the exhaust told that Jenks had indeed placed it in splendid order, much to his regret now.

So the white boat began to speed away. Jack noticed that instead of keeping on down the river, the thief was gradually starting to curve to the right, as though it was his intention to come around and head up stream. At the moment he did not realize what this might mean but a little later it dawned upon him in full force.

Meanwhile there was more or less excitement around that spot.

Jenks came wading ashore again, and holding his left arm in a way that would indicate that he had received some sort of a wound at the time the desperate thief fired at him.

The younger stranger was dancing around in a furious fashion, and acting so like a simpleton in his anger that Jack felt ashamed to remember

that he had once suspected him of being the slick thief whom the paper called Slim Jim. Why, this chap was an innocent of the innocents, just the kind of boy his appearance had stamped him—some rich man's petted darling, allowed to have a fine boat for a play toy, with a steady man to run it for him, whom he could boss around.

All this Jack realized in the brief space of time that he stood there, surveying the scene, and hearing the popping of the motor boat's exhaust sounding less and less noisy, as the stolen craft went further and further away from the island.

And about that time the distracted owner of the boat seemed to realize that he and Jenks were not alone. He stared at Jack and his companions as though unable to understand how they came there, or if they were really flesh and blood.

"They said that this miserable island was haunted," he exclaimed, "and I'm beginning to believe it's so. Who are you, fellows, and where did you spring from?"

Jack was for taking the bull by the horns. He had seen all his suspicions concerning these two swept aside, so that they were no longer objects of concern in his eyes.

"It's too long a story to tell just now," he remarked as he approached the other. "We belong in a town above here, and are having a little outing on board our three motor boats, which are tied up not far away. When you landed we wondered who you were, because there has been a robbery committed in Lawrence up the river, and the two yeggs who broke into the bank were said to have escaped in a white motor boat with a red band around the gunnel."

"What's that?" gasped the other, as though staggered by such astonishing information, "took us for burglars, did you? I like that, now. Why, my name's Algernon Lorrimer, and my father's one of the richest men in Minneapolis. Get that?"

"Yes, and I've heard of him, all right," said Jack. "We're glad to meet you, Algernon, even if it is under queer conditions. My name's Jack Stormways," and then he proceeded to string off the names of his five companions in rapid-fire order, the other boy bowing politely at each in turn; evidently Algernon had been well brought up, and was accustomed to the usages of good society, even though he might be only a "stick" aboard a boat, insofar as being able to help run the same was concerned.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, fellows,"

he said, loftily. "I hope you'll pardon me if I seem rather out of sorts. Here I am left, high and dry on this island, with my new boat stolen by that contemptible rascal. But he'll be sorry he ever treated me like this. My father will have him found out and punished. That boat cost two thousand dollars just last week. We were on our first cruise with it, and playing tag with Chauncey Gregory and his Firefly. They were to chase us, you know, and the first one to get to St. Louis without being seen by the other was to win the race. But we had some trouble with our engine, though we managed to fix it in great shape. And now my Saunterer is stolen by a vile wretch. How could he have ever come out here on this lonely island; and what would he want to take such a fine boat for, when he couldn't sell it anywhere, without being arrested?"

Apparently Algernon was "some talker," as Josh put it. Once he got started, and he was like a seven-day clock in action. And Jack chuckled to think that they had been looking upon all this as assumed, and that the millionaire's pampered boy had been a desperate thief, playing a little game. It was one of the most ridiculous happenings that had ever come to the motor boat chums.

And as Algernon was talking a sudden idea had leaped into Jack's active mind. This time it was founded on facts that were absolutely true, and could be relied upon.

It all hinged on that wonderful sweater belonging to Buster, and which was so queerly marked with a blue moon.

Now Jack knew positively that the same garment had been in the shed where the trio of motor boats were lying, awaiting the beginning of the cruise, on the previous evening, for he had handled it himself. Buster could not find it when he wanted to wear it later on, and the rest believed that it had been carelessly left somewhere in the shop or shed, though as we have seen, the fat boy suspected Josh of playing a sly trick on him.

Now the fact that this strange man was actually wearing the novel sweater was positive evidence that he must have been in the shop of the boat builder on the previous night, for some purpose or other, and had taken the garment then, perhaps because it looked warm, and he anticipated a chilly ride down the river.

Yes, Jack had jumped to a conclusion in the matter. Although his first guess with regard to the identity of Algernon and Jenks had been a bad one, he believed he could do much better

with this other fellow; and whom he now believed to be one of the desperate scoundrels who had broken into the bank at Lawrence.

A lot of things went to point that way; and Buster's sweater was the only connecting clue, as it were. How the men happened to be on the island, and why one of them was ready to take chances in stealing some of their food, of course Jack was hardly in a condition to say just then. They must have been pretty hungry, which would indicate that they could not have had any food aboard their boat at the time they fled from pursuit. Perhaps some accident had happened to the craft in which they had come down the river. That would account for the fellow stealing the fine new motor boat belonging to the tenderfoot cruiser, Algernon. It may have taken his fancy for some reason or other; perhaps because it happened to resemble their own craft, now disabled.

Strange how things will fly through the mind at times, when there is any cause for excitement. Jack thought of a score of facts calculated to back up his theory, even while he was standing there, with the throbbing of the lost boat still sounding faintly in his ears.

Whatever of mystery there might be about the actions of the man who had run off with the

Saunterer, this was really no time for explanations, or to try and figure things out. Later on, when it was all over, and they could sit comfortably beside a camp fire, it would be fun to piece things together, and find out just what had influenced all these events to come about.

"Boys," Jack said, turning to his friends, "I've just come to the conclusion that we've run across one of those bank thieves after all."

"You mean the chap who stole my boat?" ejaculated Algernon, "goodness gracious! who would have thought now, that I'd come in contact with such desperate characters in my little run down-river. And he shot my man, too; see, Jenks is getting one of your friends, to wrap a rag around his arm. This is thrilling. It makes my blood run cold to think that I was actually so close to a real burglar. Won't I have the story to tell Chauncey, though? But how am I ever to get off this island, and try to recover my boat?"

"Leave that to us, Algernon," said Jack, quietly.

"Hurrah! Jack's taken the job on!" shouted Josh, excitedly, "and when he says he'll see it through, you can bet your boots he means business. What are we going to do about it, Jack?"

All eyes were of course turned upon the Commodore. In this critical time they seemed to depend on him to lead the way out of the maze. Jack would know what to do; that was what the rest always said to each other, as soon as any serious difficulty arose.

And Jack simply raised his hand as if to call for silence, as he said:

"Wait a minute, fellows, I want to listen to what those rapid-fire explosions aboard the white motor boat are telling me. They're getting louder again, you notice, with every minute that passes."

CHAPTER XIV

READY FOR TROUBLE

"Jack, you're right," remarked George, after the whole of them had stood there, listening eagerly for a minute or so. "That sounds louder all the time."

"P'raps the wind's shifted?" suggested Josh.

"No, I don't believe it has, even a little bit," Herb observed, on his part.

"Then what d'ye think it means?" asked Bumpus, who was just as much interested as any one of his boat-mates.

"Why, he changed his course, that's what," declared Josh.

"Oh! that's it, eh?" Bumpus went on to say, "and as he was running up-stream before, why, that means he's coming down now."

"Seems like it, Bumpus," admitted George.

"Why?" the fat boy kept asking; for when anything puzzled him he never gave his comrades any peace until they had explained the particulars; for Bumpus could be a standing interrogation point when he chose.

"Now you've got me," admitted Josh, "'cause I don't know."

"He ain't doing that just for fun, you believe, don't you? He's got a card up his sleeve, as they say; and means to play it on us. Started up the river in the beginning just to use a little time, and pull the wool over our eyes, fellers. Now he comes a-spinnin' down again in a little different direction. Why? Again I wait to hear some wise head say it," and Bumpus assumed an expectant attitude as he went on in this manner.

"Jack, c'n you answer him?" Herb questioned; for, as usual they began to turn toward the Commodore at such a time, just as though he might be an unabridged dictionary, and able on any and all occasions to supply the crowd with information.

"Well, if, as we seem to believe, this bold scamp is one of those bank robbers, there's only one way open for him to escape from any pursuers, and that's down the Mississippi," Jack started to say; when George uttered a sudden mild whoop.

"I've got it!" he cried, excitedly.

"Bully for you, then, George," said Buster, eagerly, "and suppose you tell us before you burst. The cooper that put hoops around your

barrel didn't fasten 'em any too tight, believe me. Now, all at once, and have it over with—why should that feller turn around, and start back this way again, after getting safe off?"

"Why, because he suddenly remembered that he had a chum somewhere on this same old island," George announced, triumphantly; "how's that, Jack?"

Jack patted him on the back approvingly.

"Looks like you'd guessed it the first crack, George," he declared. "Yes, whether he forgot that fact for a few minutes, or has been playing a little game to make us believe he was aiming to go up-river, there's no doubt but what he's heading back now so's to pick the other one up. These sort of fellows stand by each other through thick and thin, you know; that's their best quality, always."

"And Jack," piped up Buster just then, "don't you think that there might be something else adrawin' him back here—f'r instance, that stuff they took away from the busted Lawrence bank?"

"Hurray for Buster; he's all right; and this time he's struck a brilliant idea! Great head, old man, better be careful of your brains after this. You're waking up at last; ain't he, Jack?" but Buster did not deign to pay any attention

to all this talk on the part of Josh, because he knew the other must be secretly envious of him.

"That's really a bright thought, Buster," admitted Jack, immediately. "This fellow might be ready to stick by his crony; but we know he's bound not to desert the plunder; and that must still be on the island here, aboard their boat, wherever they've got her hidden. You know, boys, we kind of thought they'd hide here, and try to paint the boat some dark color, so it wouldn't give them away; for every sheriff and marshal down-river way will be on the watch for a white boat with a red streak along the gunnel."

"Mercy me! and think of the warm times I'll be apt to have after this, on the way to St. Louis," remarked Algernon, throwing up his white hands in dismay.

"That is, if ever you're lucky enough to get your boat back again," reminded Josh, who rather like to "nag" such a dandified fellow as Algernon and see him squirm.

"All of you noticed the fellow was wearing that sweater with the blue moon on its front," Jack continued to say, as he explained matters more fully, "and we know that belongs to Buster here; also that it was in that boathouse of the builder where we left our three boats last

night, when we locked up; because I handled it myself. Don't you see what that means, boys?"

"That man was in there; is that it, Jack?" George asked.

"He certainly must have been, else how could he get my sweater?" demanded Buster, swelling with importance, since his name was bound to be mentioned in connection with this affair every time the story was told, and all on account of that new and remarkable garment which he had lost.

"But if they had looted the bank up at Lawrence, tell me why they'd be foolish enough to land in our town, and start in breaking open stores and boat building establishments? Seems funny business for a pair of smart yeggs?" Josh asked.

"Wait," said Jack, "go back a little. Suppose now, while they were coming down the river, that idea about the paint just bobbed up in their heads, and it seemed such a clever scheme that they wanted to kick themselves because they hadn't just thought of it before, and had some of the right kind of stuff on hand. So when they came to our town, this fellow, who must be a pretty bold sort of chap, we know, made up this plan to sneak ashore, break into

some paint shop, and get away with a supply."

"Now I'm on to what you mean, Jack," George hastened to remark, "and when he struck the boat-yard of Mr. Kedge, he just up and thought he'd sure find paint in there, because it's used on boats. And as Buster had left his new sweater lying around loose, like he always does with his things, why, Mr. Burglar, feeling the night air on the river a bit cold, just swiped the same. That's as plain as the nose on Josh's face here."

"Just you let my nose alone," muttered Josh, like a flash, "it may be a little bigger'n yours, but it knows how to keep out of other people's business."

"Then you think, do you, Jack," George went on, "that something might have happened to their boat, and crippled the same, so that they put in here some time yesterday morning, if you can call it that, though this is still the same day?"

"Yes, it looks as if they needed a new boat to continue their voyage down the river; and seeing this fine chance, while Algernon and Jenks were fast asleep, this man started to sneak it away. He might have done it, and never a thing would they have known until morning, only for the sneeze that Buster here gave."

"See that," cried the fat boy, triumphantly,

"you all have poked heaps of fun at me because I sneeze so much; but here's a time that it paid right handsomely."

"Sure, Buster," said George, quickly, "when it comes to waking people up, the flock of geese that once saved Rome from a night attack didn't have anything on you, with your fine sneeze. I give you my word, you'd arouse a whole city, once you let loose."

"Bah! just jealous, that's all; but don't you dare to imitate me, because I give you warning right now I'm going to get that sneeze copyrighted, that's what," Buster went on to declare emphatically.

"Seems to me," remarked Herb, "there's a heap of engines getting into trouble about now; George has his spell; then Jenks had to work on the one in their boat; and now we suspect that these runaway robbers had a breakdown of their own."

"That shows you that I ain't the only one that gets into a mess with motor trouble," George hastened to tell them.

"But arrah, now, phat arre we goin' to do about this same broth of a bye comin' back till the island for frind?" Andy wanted to know just then.

"Sensible of you to ask that, Andy," re-

marked Jack, "because it might be possible for us to surprise the pair, if only we could guess about where he meant to land along the shore."

"Whee! is that what's on the bill, Jack?" exclaimed Buster, "then how glad I am that you've got that splendid little Marlin gun of yours handy. If there's going to be a scrap, every one of us ought to pick up some sort of club, so's to make a respectable showing. And right here I see one I'm going to cabbage on the spot."

"Which spot?" queried Josh; but no one paid the slightest attention to jokes at such a critical moment.

"Listen again, boys," ordered Jack, "and see if you can tell whether he's coming down this side of the island, or the other one; because that would mean a whole lot for us."

For a minute no one uttered a sound. The quick pulsations of the exhaust belonging to the stolen motor boat could be plainly heard, for the night was as still as death, all but that murmur of the breeze among the treetops on the island, and perhaps the gentle lapping of the river on the rocks along the shore.

"I think he's started down the other side, Jack," said George.

"Same here," echoed Josh.

"I don't seem to be able to guess," complained Buster, "one time I think it is the other side of the island and then again seems to me he's heading right back the way he went."

"Other side of me," Herb went on to say, wishing to be counted.

"Sure, that's me ijee to a dot, so 'tis," declared the Irish lad, vehemently.

"Other side have it, five to one," Jack went on, somehow forgetting that there were others present, though for that matter Algernon was so bewildered by all the strange things that were happening, he did not seem able to gather his wits together, and Jenks was apparently quite satisfied to leave the whole matter of the attempted recovery of the motor boat to the charge of these six wide-awake young chaps who had shown themselves to be so clever; though if it ever came to a crisis, doubtless the sturdy machinist would be only too willing to throw himself into the fight, and do his full duty.

"There, it's stopped now, boys!" cried George suddenly.

"You're right," declared Jack, "and as near as I can place it, seems as if the last sound came from across the island, too, perhaps a little further up. Come on, everybody, and let's see

if we can push right through the place. The trees are scattered, and the moon shows bright enough to give us some light."

"We're off!" exclaimed Josh, exultantly, for he liked to be in action.

"Who's afraid?" demanded Buster, waving the big billet of wood he had picked up, as though anxious to do some service with the same.

"Keep still, everybody, and look where you're going," warned Jack, leading off.

CHAPTER XV

JUST A MINUTE TOO LATE

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Buster, presently, and the others heard more or less of a loud crashing, which would seem to indicate that the fat boy, who was always rather clumsy in his movements, had stumbled and fallen amidst the impediments that sprinkled their course.

"Hurt, Buster?" questioned Herb, who was close behind.

"Naw, only knocked a little skin off my knees, I guess. Better luck next time," was the cheerful reply, as the unfortunate one scrambled to his feet, and again resumed his forward progress.

When Jack and his five mates started off, the man Jenks, and his employer, Algernon Lorrimer, apparently did not mean to be left entirely in the lurch. They were in the group now pushing through the wooded part of the island, and trying to surmount the many difficulties that beset their course.

Algernon had about as much trouble as Buster to navigate safely; now it was some unnoticed

log that threatened to trip him up, and again a hanging vine tried to choke him outright. Jenks hovered near by, ready to come to the rescue of his employer should the latter succeed in getting into a severe pinch. As Josh afterward said in commenting on this solicitude on the part of the machinist, perhaps Jenks had not been paid his week's wages as yet, and wanted to make sure he would have an employer to whom he could look for the expected cash.

One thing proved of considerable assistance, and this was the moon. Battered though it might be, and with one side partly gone, still the faithful old sky lantern was able to give out a considerable amount of silvery light.

"Lucky we've got that moon, let me tell you," grunted Buster, as he continued to boom along, making enough noise, so Josh declared, to warn the whole neighborhood of their coming.

"Some people'd need three moons to get along half way decent," was what Josh declared from some point close by.

"Hush!" Jack remarked, and at that they all fell quiet again.

Indeed, it was no child's play making their way through the dense growth that covered the main part of the island. Even in the daytime they would have had more or less trouble

in accomplishing such a task; and when attempting it with only the deceptive moonlight as a source of illumination, the task became doubly difficult.

Once Jack called a brief halt.

It was his idea to try and ascertain whether there were any sounds ahead, such as might indicate the presence of busy workers, getting their belongings from the boat that was about to be abandoned to the one that had just fallen into their possession, through a stroke of luck, backed up by daring.

It might be in the shape of voices, a cough, or any sort of sound that would betray the presence of human beings; why, even a sneeze, such as that famous one of Buster, would do the business.

But somehow nothing of the sort seemed to come to their strained hearing; at any rate most of them failed to catch such a welcome sound. Yet when Jack bade them start on again, lowering his voice to a thrilling whisper almost, it seemed as if he felt a new confidence, showing that he believed he had heard something or other.

Instead of getting better the nearer they drew to the other side of the little island that had such

a bad name, it seemed as though conditions steadily became worse.

Buster and Algernon simply could not hold up to the pace set by such agile chaps as Jack, George, Andy and Josh, so that they were gradually but surely falling back, and being put out of the race.

Herb was not much better, for it was never a habit of the easy-going skipper of the solid old Comfort to hurry more than he could reasonably help.

But then probably it would not matter so much after all. There were still five in the front rank, for Jenks had now forged alongside the others, thinking he might best serve his master by trying to recover the boat, rather than standing by to pick him up in case he fell. And more than that, there was Jack handling that reliable Marlin of his in a fashion that seemed to speak volumes for his intentions, once he sighted the enemy.

When excitement rules the camp it is wonderful how many things can be crowded into a small space of time. People seem to pass through a lifetime in a few minutes, providing events come tumbling over one another, helter-skelter like.

Now, when they came to figure upon it later

on, the motor boat chums were of the opinion that even under such adverse conditions they could not have been more than six or seven minutes in passing through the wooded center of the island. It was only a small affair at best, and by daylight could have been crossed in much less time. And yet there was Buster, for instance, who must have been laboring under the impression that fully half an hour had already passed since they first started to break into the thick growth, and butt up against all these crazy obstacles—the logs that would get under a fellow's feet, the encircling loops of dangling wild grape-vines; the trees that bobbed up most unexpectedly, and tried to knock one's brains out, and a lot of other things along the same line "too numerous to mention."

Of course none of them gave much heed to what their conduct would be when they managed to overtake the enemy.

That would have to be left pretty much to accident. Perhaps some of the boys, under the belief that they must present quite a hostile appearance, with all sorts of clubs and cudgels in evidence, not to speak of that gun Jack carried, fancied that the two burglars would take to flight at sight of the advancing legion. But Jack, and perhaps Herb also, did not delude

themselves with this expectation; for they could remember just how that fellow aboard the stolen boat had warned Jenks off, and even wounded him in the arm when he refused to stop short.

They set him down as a dangerous character, which he undoubtedly must have been, to have carried out the bold programme connected with the looting of the up-river bank.

At any rate, they must be getting close to the other side of the island now, for there was a perceptible slope downward, and this must mean the crest had been left behind.

Yes, and sure enough, the trees were getting less dense, though the brush might be as thick as ever. Jack hoped for one thing that luck would favor them, and allow of their breaking out upon the little beach at just the exact spot where the two men were working.

At the same time he did not feel any too sanguine of success, for which there were numerous reasons. Surely the two thieves must be aware of the fact that the pack was pushing toward them, for there was plenty of noise accompanying their forward progress.

And knowing this, would it not be the easiest thing for them to gauge their time of flitting by the closeness of the coming host? Jack thought so, even while still exerting himself to

the uttermost in order to get to the shore as speedily as possible.

Ah! now he could see more light ahead, which told in so many words that they must be close to the river again. Their troubles were behind them now; that is, insofar as they concerned navigating the dense jungle that covered the island of the bad name.

Those still ahead would be of an entirely different nature, and might consist of running up against the desperate thieves.

Just then Jack heard a voice, a very gruff voice, which he recognized as belonging to the man who had run off with the white boat.

"That all, Jim?"

The speaking of that name thrilled Jack, for only too well did he remember that it was mentioned in the newspaper article describing the robbery; and if he had had the slightest doubt before as to the identity of the precious pair, it was now a thing of the past.

If the man addressed made any sort of reply Jack failed to catch it. He hoped, however, that it would be of a negative character—that they might still have something more to do; because Jack had located the voice, and was of the impression that it came from a little further up the narrow beach. They had come fairly close

to the spot where the transfer of belongings was being made, but did not hit on it exactly. And it is an old saying that a miss is as good as a mile; at any rate it would likely prove such in this case.

And so they presently burst out of the cover, and found themselves looking on the moonlit surface of the flowing Mississippi again.

Jack, Jenks, George and Josh had somehow come out in a clump, with Andy close at their heels. None of them more than cast a fleeting glance out on the dancing water, for they could see immediately that there was nothing calculated to interest them there.

Jack immediately turned up the beach, and started to sprint, for it was open here, and the absence of obstacles offered them a splendid chance to do something worth while.

There happened to be a little point setting out just above, on which grew some stunted trees and considerable brush. This helped to make a cove, perhaps something like the one which the boys had selected as their harbor, and in which the three motor boats rested snugly even then.

And as the two fugitive thieves had chanced to come down that side of the island they must

have picked this out for a stopping-place, where they could hide their craft.

Rapidly did the running Jack, backed up by his allies, near this point of land. Once it was reached, and he believed he would be able to see what lay beyond; though somehow Jack did not appear to entertain any doubt as to the nature of this discovery.

He had already reached its outer edge, and in another ten seconds must have been able to push directly through, when, just as he feared, he heard sounds that announced the finish of that stage of the game.

The loud crackle of a motor's exhaust broke the silence; and from the rapidity with which it worked he knew that the engine had been started at almost full speed.

"Oh! rats!" burst out George, who had been doing his best to get alongside Jack, and succeeded too, "they've got away from us!"

They kept on running, however, and speedily broke through the fringe of shrubbery that shut off their view. As they did so it was to hear a loud hoarse laugh, that came rolling in from the water, and to see a white boat rushing away over the glistening surface of the river.

CHAPTER XVI

IN HOT PURSUIT

"It's all off!" grunted Josh, evidently vastly disappointed by the outcome of their adventure.

"Yes, they've given us the slip!" declared Jack, who was already trying to think up some new plan whereby they might further harrass the bold thieves who had thus far carried things all their own way.

"How'd you come to let 'em go?"

This from the panting Buster, and he really meant it, too, which was the strangest part of it all; he had come rumbling along like an ice-wagon, as Josh was accustomed to saying, swinging that long club of his in a way that was as dangerous to friends as foes.

"Huh! let 'em!" Josh went on to say, mockingly, "I like that, now, sure I do. As if we had anything to do with their skipping out. They were ready to flew the coop when they heard us a-comin', and only had to start the engine. Jenks, here he got that fixed a little too soon. If he'd only let her go till morning he'd not be minus a boat now, see?"

All of which was true, but nobody sucked any consolation out of it. When a horse has been stolen, how little the unlucky owner cares when some neighbors come along and show him how he might have avoided his loss; what he thinks of most of all is the matter of getting the lost animal back again into his barn.

And Jack was built that way. He seldom spent any time mourning over the milk that was spilt; but immediately proceeded to try and remedy conditions.

One thing sure, if ever they hoped to give these fellows any further trouble, it would not be accomplished by sitting down, and trying to discover why they could not have navigated that little patch of timber faster; or pushed through at a more direct line, so as to have saved that fatal angle.

The mill will never again grind with the water that is past—how frequently Jack could remember hearing his teacher in school say that; and he had often applied it to his own actions.

No, the robbers were done with that island, and had also abandoned their own boat, for it could be seen tied up there, just ahead. If they were to be met again it must be on the river.

That would mean a hot pursuit on the part of the motor boat boys; and this was what

Jack was turning over so quickly in his mind while he stood there looking out after the disappearing craft.

"Oh! they left it after all!" exclaimed Algernone, as he too came up, considerably the worse for wear, because of the frequent arguments he had had with various unseen branches and logs and such things, in his hasty run.

"He thinks that white boat is his," exclaimed Josh, pointing as he spoke, "but that's all wrong, Algernon, and you're off your trolley, sure. They had one of the same color, if not as good a boat as yours; and they've kindly left it for you, with their compliments. That was about what he meant when he shouted across the water, you know."

"Jack, what are you thinking about now?" demanded George, who knew from the signs that the other was turning some sort of idea over in that active mind of his.

"I was wondering whether we wanted to take another turn with these fellows, that's all," replied Jack, immediately.

"But—they've cleared out, you know!" said Buster, blankly, as he looked over the bright surface of the river, as though wondering however a fellow was going to walk on the water.

"Well, haven't we got boats to follow them

with?" demanded Josh, who was quicker-witted than his stout chum.

"And one of 'em a crack-a-jack for speed," added George, proudly.

"When it's going, you mean, George," corrected Josh; at which sly thrust the party indicated simply curled his lip, and disdained to reply.

"Well, whatever we decide to do, the sooner we settle the matter the better," remarked Jack, impatiently, something rather uncommon with him.

"Sure thing, because they're putting up a hefty run of it right now, and can do it right along with that boat," added Josh.

"What speed can she make, Algernon?" queried George.

"Fifteen miles an hour when she's run by one that knows how to handle her; but by myself I could never beat eleven at the best," came the frank admission, which told just why he had hired the mechanician to accompany him in his run down river in competition with another "chappie" who also owned an expensive boat.

"Huh! I have had eighteen, and I think nearly twenty out of mine," said George, trying to seem as though he were not boasting, but

simply telling the plain truth, "and I think she could do that last, with the current to help out. So you see we'd be apt to come up on those fellows hand over fist. All of you could pile aboard the Wireless with me, and given an hour or so, I reckon we'd bring up alongside your stolen property, Algernon."

At that there was a scornful outbreak from Buster.

"Glory, don't I see this whole bunch aboard your Wireless, though? It'd be a sight to make a feller weep, the way they'd have to sit in the middle, and never so much as wink an eye for fear they'd turn the speed boat upside-down. Excuse me from being in the party, George. I like your boat all right—from a distance. If I had company I'd rather stay on this blessed old island than get on the Wireless with such a crowd as this. Please let me go with you, Herb, if I have to be taken along."

"Sure we will," said George, cheerfully, "and only too glad of the chance. But if we're going to do any chasing after that runaway it's time we made a start."

"Then come on, everybody!" cried Jack, once more starting away on a run, and this time following the beach down toward the lower end of the island.

The whole eight of them were immediately in motion. As before, Buster and Algernon quickly fell behind, though they persisted manfully, and meant to come up before the boats could be poled out of the cove and the start made.

Jack was even then and there fixing things in his mind, so that there would be no confusion once they started. He decided that as Herb would be hopelessly distanced by the other two boats, and could not be depended on to assist in any way, if he started at all he should take aboard as his crew Buster and Algernon; for they could not be expected to prove of any great assistance, should matters come to a conflict of any kind. In fact, Jack would feel more comfortable with the fat boy missing, for Buster so often upset all calculations by some ill-advised if well-meant play.

The others could be apportioned to the Tramp and the Wireless; with three of them keeping Jack company, Jenks one of the number, as he promised to be a valuable ally when the finish came around.

Running along the open beach was not anything so difficult as trying to make progress through all that wild jungle; and in an exceedingly brief space of time the familiar cove

loomed up, with its attendant boats, all tied up snugly to convenient trees, and in deep water at that, which prevented any possibility of their getting aground by a sudden fall of the river during the night, as sometimes happened.

Each skipper made directly for his own boat the moment he reached the scene. It was no time to think of taking down the beloved khaki-colored tent; if Herb did think it worth while to tag after the others, then things on the island would have to look after themselves until such time as the boys could return. And just when this would be, not even Jack could so much as guess at this early stage in the expected chase.

Although doubtless more or less excited, neither George nor Jack seemed apt to make a serious blunder in the start. They clambered aboard their respective boats and meanwhile Jack was shouting directions:

"Andy, you go with George, while Josh and Jenks will come aboard here. And be quick to cast off, and get the push poles handy, so we won't be wasting time. George, for once you've got to promise me on your honor not to run ahead. There are only five of us, and we'll need every hand against such hard cases. Remember now, I' m expecting you to keep along-

side. The Tramp can overtake that boat all right, never fear."

George said he would try and do just as the Commodore said. At the same time they knew how great a disappointment it must be to the reckless chap to have to give such a promise; for George was no coward, whatever other shortcomings might be placed against him; and given half a chance he would have readily hurled himself at the two fugitive burglars with any sort of backing.

Everybody worked with the utmost haste.

Why, it seemed as though they had hardly gained a footing on the boats before both hawsers were cast loose, and the push poles could be heard splashing in the water.

The sound thrilled every one of them; for there may be times when even such a simple thing as water splashing seems to give warning of serious times coming. And with such desperate men as the two bank thieves to overhaul and perhaps capture, surely Jack and his chums had a "a hard nut to crack," as Josh expressed it.

As soon as the first boat, which happened to be the Tramp, was well out of the sheltered nook, Jack gave the crank a turn, and with a whirr the engine started to working. He immediately

took charge, for no one knew so well as he how to get the best that was in that motor in action.

Jack was a bit nervous concerning the other boat. It was a toss-up as to whether the machinery of the "freaky" Wireless could be made to start, just when it was of the utmost importance, for George never knew a thing about it, and always approached the subject with his heart in his mouth, so to speak.

So all of them held their breath when they saw him get ready to give the crank its customary whirl.

Then all at once there broke out the welcome sound of the explosions that told them the story. Wireless stock went up fifty per cent just then; Wireless was going to be good, and behave!

And so the two motor boats carrying the determined little band of intended pursuers swung out upon the broad and heaving bosom of the mighty Mississippi, and headed south.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MOONLIGHT CHASE

Doubtless those boys would never be apt to forget that chase on the river, even though in times to come they might have a part in many other exciting scenes.

The moon was very bright at this hour, not a cloud dimming its lustre; and upon the water objects could be seen for quite some distance away. Although these might not be as distinct as in the daytime; still, if it was a moving boat, any one could recognize familiar features about it. And should it happen to be a peculiar boat, or one that was painted snow white, surely they could tell it, once they chanced to come within a certain radius.

George was of course fidgetty.

That old spirit of wanting to let loose, and shoot away at the very top of speed of which his high-powered motor was capable, must be gripping the boy, for it is hard to make one of his impulsive temperament act in reason.

But Jack was bound that both boats must keep in touch all the time, and that George should

hold his "bucking broncho" engine, as Buster called it, in sufficiently to avoid leaving the Tramp behind.

There were lots of good reasons for this, too.

In the first place Jack knew only too well that on most occasions when George had had trouble with his engine, it was when he was playing all sorts of pranks with it, taking chances, in the hope of causing his boat to make a record for the class to which it belonged. And if he were compelled to moderate his speed just a little, there would be a far better opportunity for him to keep right along to the finish.

Then again, this was no good-natured race intended to test the racing abilities of the two rival boats. Jack had always admitted frankly enough that if the Wireless only behaved herself, she was in a class by herself, insofar as the other boats of the fleet were concerned. The only trouble was, that six times out of seven she insisted on "cutting up" just when George was congratulating himself that he had finally conquered that turbulent spirit.

They would, provided they caught up with the stolen Saunterer, find themselves pitted against a couple of bad men, who would not hesitate at anything in order to escape with their stolen plunder.

And that was the main reason why Jack had insisted upon George binding himself to an agreement to stay by the others, come what would. Why, he was that reckless, that, should he overtake the fugitive thieves, with only Andy back of him, chances were he would dash at them, and somebody was bound to get hurt, probably George himself.

Everything seemed to be going along nicely, after they had gotten well away from the island. Jack wondered whether Herb would insist on following after them in his slow boat, or stay by the camp. Perhaps finding that Buster and Algernon were both eager to get on the move, no matter if they could not hope to arrive in time to lend a helping hand, Herb might make the start.

"Josh, can you see the island still?" the skipper of the Tramp called out, for he was himself too busy watching how his machine worked to take his eyes off it; and then, again, what was the use, when he could get the information second-hand just as well.

"Yep, though it's getting kind of faint now, Jack," came the reply. "You see, this here moonlight ain't all its cracked up to be. I've proved it, too. 'Nother feller'd me we made a wager that we could tell anybody half a mile

away; then we went outside to prove it! My conscience! there was a black thing in the country road just about sixty yards away; he said it looked like a bear, and I was just dead certain 'twas a cow a-lyin' down. Well, we walked up to it, and what d'ye think, it was only an old stump after all."

"Look as close as you can, and tell me if you see anything of another boat coming out," Jack went on, as soon as he could work a few words in; for when Josh felt the inclination to tell one of his little stories, nothing in all creation could stop him, unless some one threw a lump of mud squarely into his open mouth, as once happened when he was in swimming; and even then, as soon as he had managed to get rid of it, he had gone on deliberately, "As I was a-sayin'——" and so on.

"Why," he went on to remark, dubiously, "I c'n see somethin' a-movin' over there, somethin' dark, too, and just in the same place we came out of; but whether it's a boat, say, Jack, don't ask me to take my affidavy, for I won't, that's all."

"I won't ask you, because I'm sure now it must be a boat, and of course Comfort, with the rest of the crowd aboard," remarked Jack.

"But shucks! everything'll be over, even the

shouting, when that tub comes along. What's the use in Herb startin' at all, Jack?"

"He had that privilege," returned the skipper. "I didn't just want to tell him he had ought to stay by the camp, to look after things. And besides, there's our new friend, Algernon, of course he'll be just as anxious as anything to know as soon as he can whether we've recovered his Saunterer or not. But I guess you don't see anything of that moving thing, now, eh, Josh?"

"That's right, she's blotted out; and I could crack my eyes lookin' without getting a peep," replied Josh, immediately he had looked again.

"All right, let's forget all about Herb, and the rest from now on, because there's little chance that they'll have anything to do with the finish of the race. George is holding in pretty well, you see, Josh. He can put a crimp in that speed mania, when he wants to."

"But gee! listen to him growling, would you?" remarked the other, with a dry chuckle, for he dearly loved to see George held under Jack's thumb, for the skipper of the Wireless was so boastful most of the time. "I pity poor old Andy havin' to play crew for such a bear with a sore head. Wouldn't surprise me a whit, Jack, if the Wireless man just found he couldn't

stand bein' held in, and let go for all he's worth, shootin' up ahead like fun."

"No, you're way off there, Josh; you heard George give me his word; and no matter what other faults George may have, he never goes back on his promises. That's his best point. I'd as soon take his word as lots of fellow's binding written agreement."

"Well, I guess that's so, Jack," said Josh, slowly, for he wanted to be fair toward his impulsive chum; and in spite of his many faults, these comrades, tried and true, loved George Rollins; strange, but impulsive, hot-tempered people always make more and warmer friends than cold, calculating ones, no matter how much these latter show themselves to be honest and true.

For some little time they continued to shove along down the river, with both boats doing splendidly. Just how many miles an hour they were making Jack could not say positively; but he thought it must be in the neighborhood of fifteen.

George called out a number of times, and begged the other skipper to do something more than just crawl. It seemed to be a painful experience to the captain of the Wireless, and yet when he was taken to task later on for his impatience,

and made to see how well his engine had behaved when not constantly meddled with, and pushed to its utmost limit, George candidly admitted that Jack's plan was by long odds the best for all concerned, indeed, the only one they could have followed, under the circumstances.

They were certainly putting the miles behind them as they kept on flying down with the current. Jack had to figure it out, so as to see about what sort of a lead the fugitive white boat had on them.

He could give something of a guess as to about how many minutes had elapsed between the time the other craft had started past the lower end of the island, and that marking their own departure. That was not over ten minutes all told, he believed, though had any of the others been asked they would have said twice that because they were excited at the time, and seconds were drawn out doubly long.

Well, saying that it was ten minutes, and the boat was going at the rate of twelve miles an hour that would mean the stolen craft had a lead of about two miles all told. Jack knew that they should cut this down before an hour had crept by, unless something happened to hold them up, an accident to the Wireless, or to his own motor.

So when something like half an hour had gone, he began to exhibit more or less anxiety as to whether any signs of the white boat could be seen down-stream. In order to find this out at the earliest opportunity Jack had stationed his "crew" up forward in the bow, where he could have nothing in the way; and as the moon was about in the east he was not compelled to stare into its bright shaft of silvery light.

Every once in a while Jack would call out to ask whether there had anything appeared in sight. Josh answered him three separate times, and then laughingly said:

"Say, d'ye know what you make me think of, Jack? Remember in the old nursery tale of Bluebeard, where the poor wife, whose head is going to be cut off by the bad man keeps calling up to her sister, who is watching the road for the coming of their brothers: 'Sister Ann, Sister Ann, is there anything coming?" Well, just now, Jack, I can't even say I see a cloud of dust in the distance, as Sister Ann—hold on there, Josh, don't be in such a big hurry. Is that a moving object, or are you seeing things that hadn't ought to be there?"

He bent forward the better to look. Just then from the other boat the voice of Andy was heard to call out eagerly:

"Sure, 'tis something I say beyant there; and to me way of thinkin' it looks as much loike a white boat as two peas resimble aich ither!"

That started Josh, who did not exactly relish the idea of having to play what he called "second fiddle."

"Right you are, Andy, though a bit late, because I was just telling Jack here that our intended prey was in sight. But I'm real glad to hear you say you can see it too, better two heads than one, even if—well, I won't finish that sentence, because you might think I was comparing your coco to a mere vegetable. There, Jack, look for yourself and see," he went on, as the skipper managed to leave his engine long enough to push forward a little.

So Jack did take a good look, and when he had done so, he added his opinion to that of the other two boys.

"Guess there isn't a shadow of doubt about that, fellows; because I can see the thing moving right along; yes, that's the runaway motor boat, and we're going to catch up with the same inside of twenty minutes, unless something that isn't down on the bills comes to pass.

CHAPTER XVIII

OVERHAULED

"Well, I like that!" George was heard to exclaim; and it was noticed that he seemed to be greatly amused over something or other.

"What d'ye mean, George?" asked Josh; for the two boats were so close together all this while that those aboard could exchange comments without great difficulty; although they had to raise their voices considerably, because of the furious rattling of the exhausts.

"It must be a joke, be the powers;" broke in Andy, "because he's been laughin' that quiet loike till himsilf this long toime."

"That's what it is, a joke!" declared George; "and by that, I mean the wonderful Saunterer. Our new friend, Algernon, didn't you hear him call his expensive craft a speed boat? Say, it's a wonder, that's what! The only thing I'm surprised at is his giving her such a gentle name. He ought to have called her Chain-Lightning, Blue Streak, or something like that. Why? Because she goes like a shot—nit. A speed boat, that thing? Well, and her doing about

twelve miles an hour at her best too! I could cut circles all around her, if only you'd let me go, Jack. And look at the Tramp walking up on her; yet when did you call your craft a speed boat, I'd like to know?"

"Oh! that's what's so funny to you, is it?" Jack went on to say. "But you must remember who owns the Saunterer, George. Perhaps, when she's doing her best she seems to be flying through the water like mad to Algernon. Everybody doesn't happen to be built the same as you, George."

"Well, I should say not," declared the other, immediately.

"And there are a whole lot of people who are mighty glad of it," put in Josh.

"Arrah! that's thrue, ivery word av it," echoed Andy. "Sure the world'd be turned upside-down in a hurry, av there were many Georges runnin' around loose, thryin' to bate ivery other George. I do be sayin' 'em wid their tongues hangin' out av their mouths and, always lookin' for a race. Now, belave me the ould Comfort is a hape more to me likin' than a boat that cuts through the wather loike a knife; and kapes ye thinkin' ye are sittin' on the sharp edge all the while."

"Oh! well, there have to be different kinds of

people in this old world," sang out the undaunted George, "and we happen to be built on different models, that's all. You never saw a race horse, one of the thoroughbred type, but what he was nervous, and finely strung. I suppose that's the way I am constructed. Can't help it, to save me. I'm really unhappy to be going slow at any time."

And that was really a fact, for George ate his meals in a hurry, studied his lessons with a rush; and when he played football was always a terror upon the lines, carrying things with him; though apt to prove a weak defense in the end from overexertion.

While this little heart-to-heart talk was going on, they kept drawing steadily closer to the white boat.

Jack had begun to speculate on what was apt to happen when finally the pursuers were able to overtake the fugitive craft. He knew that the desperate men who were aboard would not be apt to think of surrendering easily, and especially when they knew or suspected that their foes consisted for the most part simply of half-grown boys.

They were armed, too, which was a fact calculated to make Jack act cautiously. True, he carried his reliable Marlin along with him,

and at close range a shotgun is a serious weapon to consiedr, especially one of hard-shooting, modern kind, but Jack did not much fancy having to use this, except as the very last resort.

One thing surprised him not a little; he wondered why the escaping bank thieves had not thought to run their boat ashore, and escape to dry land. Surely they must have realized before now that the motor boats were in pursuit of them, and bound to overtake them at that, before long.

Perhaps they were still a little in doubt. Then, again, it might be they scorned to show the white feather in connection with a pursuit conducted by mere striplings. But Jack secretly believed there must be another and more likely reason for their sticking to the boat. If they landed, they were going to have a hard time of it avoiding the many officers who, spurred on by the reward that had likely been offered for their apprehension, and the return of the stolen plunder, would be on the lookout at every cross road in the country south.

Now, if only they could get a chance to change the color of their craft they might keep right on moving down the great river, and snap their fingers at every inquisitive person; for it would

be a white boat that these watchers would be looking for.

Yes, these things must weigh heavily with the two men, and make them want to stick by the stolen motor boat as long as possible. They may have laid out their plans, and hated to alter them; and these had to do with a voyage on the river, running by night, until they reached a certain place of refuge; it might be down at St. Louis, for all Jack knew.

No matter what the reason, there was the white boat, still keeping to the middle of the wide river, and apparently doing her best to outrun the two pursuing craft.

When ten minutes had passed they had cut down that lead to less than half; and it really looked as if Jack's prediction was about to come true.

"What can that dark thing away ahead be, I wonder?" Jack heard Josh saying about this time.

As it was of the utmost importance that he keep in close touch with everything that went on, no matter how trivial it seemed, the skipper immediately raised his head, and asked:

"Where-abouts, Josh?"

"Why, look beyond the white boat, and you'll see something low down on the water,

Jack. Yes, and there's a dark spot in the middle of it, too, just like a cheese box on a raft. Can that be another island, d'ye reckon; and are they meanin' to go ashore there, and hold us off?"

"Oh! I guess not," remarked Jack, after taking a good look, "what you see, Josh, is what you'd call a raft of logs floating down the river. We've seen such pass up our way many a time. And generally the two men aboard will have a little cabin, where they take turns sleeping, when voyaging at night, which they don't often do, I reckon. Yes, I believe I can see signs of a couple of lighted lanterns. They're to tell steamboats to sheer off; and they always do, because a collision with all those big logs would go hard with any boat."

"Guess you're right, Jack," admitted the other, yielding readily to the argument which he realized was convincing. "But say, d'ye think our men see that same old raft? Could they be making for it, now, meanin' to board the same, and keep us off?"

That idea had flashed into Jack's mind, but as yet he could not say; for he was unable to see just what advantage such a course would be to the fugitives. True, the pursuers had been overhauling them so fast of late that it began

to appear as though they were having trouble with the engine Jenks had fixed. If that proved to be the case, then they might have been seized with a fear that they were going to be overhauled; and as it was too late now to reach land, the next best thing would be to make a floating battery of the raft, and keep their persistent enemies off, until they could steer the clumsy float nearer the shore.

"What's the programme, Jack?" called George, who was doubtless fairly quivering with excitement, and eager for hostilities to begin.

"You come up on the left, while we take the right," replied the other, just as though he had figured all this out, as he undoubtedly had.

"Do we board the pirate boat?" George went on.

"We'll have to, if we expect to retake it for Algernon," Jack answered.

"They'll put up a stiff fight, Jack, don't forget that," the skipper of the Wireless went on to say.

"Well, if only they'd get cold feet it'd make it all the easier for us," Josh broke in with, just then. "And don't I wish every fellow had a gun like Jack, here. Then we'd have 'em dead to rights, and they'd soon throw up the sponge,

when we started in to bombard the lot with shot. Say, Jack, you expect to use that same little Marlin, I hope; for what's the good of a gun when you won't make it squeal?"

"I'll use it to let them know we're armed, first of all," Jack explained, "and that might go a good ways toward making them surrender."

"But hold on, Jack, don't do that if the two shells are all you've got. A nice sort of thing that'd be, to scare the game, and not have anything to pink 'em with afterwards," Josh went on to say, in alarm.

"Oh! I've got a few more in my pocket," returned the other. "I was wise enough to slip some shells in my coat before we left camp the first time. Don't worry about that, Josh. There! wasn't that a man's head bobbing up above the stern of the other boat just then?"

It certainly must have been, for immediately there came a hoarse hail across the intervening water.

"Hello! there, you in the motor boats!"

"Hello! yourself! what d'ye want?" demanded George; before Jack could say a word; for George did everything so quickly it was hard to get ahead of him.

"We want you to sheer off, and mind your own business, hear that?" replied the party

aboard the white boat belonging to Algernon.

"That's just what we are doing," Jack called out. "You've made a mistake and gone off with the wrong boat. Yours is up above, on the island; and that one belongs to a friend of ours. We want it; and what's more, we're going to take it back. Do you get that?"

The two men could be heard talking hurriedly together. Possibly they were trying to figure out just what the boy meant and if it could be that their real identity were as yet unsuspected. If the boys simply looked on them as boat thieves, perhaps they might manage to deceive them in some way. But when the man spoke once more it was evident that they could not wholly reconcile themselves to this idea.

"We want to warn you to keep off, or you're apt to get hurt right bad. We're heavily armed, and will shoot straight, take that from me."

"Oh! say you so?" called out George, mockingly, "well, perhaps there are two who can play at that game, mister. Guess we've got firearms along, too; and can pepper your hides with Number Seven shot till you'll look like a Christmas plum pudding. Jack, shall we give 'em a volley right now?"

CHAPTER XIX

ABOARD THE FLOATING RAFT

Now, of course George must be only saying this for effect. He was aware of the fact that they had only one gun among them; and also that Jack would hardly be the person to use that recklessly.

"Listen to George talkin' through his hat," whispered Josh, to the skipper of the Tramp, as they continued to draw closer and closer to the white boat.

Again they could hear the two men exchanging hurried words. It looked as if the situation was none of their choosing, and that they did not particularly fancy it.

"If you won't keep back, then take that!" suddenly shouted the heavy-voiced man; and immediately following his words there came a bright flash, and the report of a pistol.

"Oh!" exclaimed some one aboard the Wireless; and Jack had a shock.

"Anybody hurt over there?" he sang out, as he snatched up his shotgun, and made ready to use it; if the answer was to the effect that

damage had been done, Jack might turn the weapon directly on the fleeing craft, and scatter the contents of a shell in that quarter.

"Er, no, guess not," replied George, "but say, that bullet hummed right past my head, and I nearly broke my neck trying to dodge it. Jack, give 'em a return shot, please do!"

"Bang!" went a second discharge.

This time the man in the fugitive motor boat had evidently turned his attention toward the Tramp, for Jack and those with him plainly heard the peculiar whistle of the passing lead.

It was too much. Jack could stand for a good deal, but this thing of being made a target to suit the whim of a rascally thief galled him. There was one way in which it might be stopped; and this was to let them understand that when George said they were armed it was no idle boast, although they might not be bristling with weapons, as he would have had the others believe.

And so Jack let fly with one barrel of his Marlin, aiming to one side of the white boat, now close at hand.

The charge of shot ploughed up the water. It also caused the head to vanish from the stern of the boat. Evidently that shot created something like a little panic aboard the Saunterer.

How were those two men to know but what every fellow pitted against them gripped some sort of dangerous firearm, and with boyish abandon was ready to make use of it?

They did not shoot again, and from this circumstance Jack believed that they were ready to change their plans. If the pursuers could not be frightened off by threats, perhaps they might be content to withdraw, if they could only recover the stolen boat again.

"They're going to pass the raft by, Jack!" ventured Josh, just then.

"Think so?" the other went on to remark, "well, I'm just guessing otherwise, and that they mean to run alongside. Look sharp, Josh, and you'll see how they keep on edging that way."

"What if they leave the motor boat and make a run for the log cabin on the raft—will you crack away at 'em, Jack, and try to hit the fellers in the legs?" was what the excited Josh wanted to know.

Jack had to laugh softly at that.

"You talk as if any one could put a load of shot just where he wanted it, without doing any serious damage," he remarked. "If that was easy, I'd like to tickle those chaps; but there's too serious a chance of crippling them

for life, or even worse than that. We're so close now that a load of Sevens would go just like a great big bullet. I'm not ready for that and won't be unless they hurt one of our crowd. If that happens, they'll have to look out."

"There they go, heading in to the logs, just like you said, Jack!" cried Josh, more worked up than ever. "Oh! please give 'em another shot if they jump on the raft. P'raps it might scare the pair so much they'd just throw up their hands, and surrender."

"Do you see the men who are running the logs down-stream?" demanded Jack.

"Of course I do, two of 'em, and they look like they hardly knew what all this racket means," Josh continued. "Now, wouldn't it be just great if they jumped our birds, and got 'em. All we'd have to do then would be to take charge of the scamps, hand over a little reward to the raftsmen, and start back. Look! Jack, there, they are going to strike the logs now. They've shut off the motor, you see, and that tells the story. Take it from me we've got the fellers bad scared right now. Whoop! George, knock 'em both over with your elephant gun! Quick! soak it to 'em, fellers!"

Of course Josh was only shouting this last in

order to further alarm the two fugitives. For some reason or other the men had determined to abandon their boat. Perhaps they found it was commencing to balk, and could not be depended on. Then again, as the others had overtaken them, it was plain that they must open up some other means for escaping.

Jack still clung to his former idea that the men hoped the boys would be satisfied with recovering the stolen Saunterer; and finding that they were ready to defend themselves would withdraw. Then they could force the raftsmen to steer the clumsy craft over to whichever shore they thought safer, and in this way they might escape with their booty.

The white boat came alongside the raft, and bumped heavily.

Two flying figures were seen to leave the boat, and find a footing on the slippery logs. Immediately they did so they started headlong toward the center where the little log-cabin shelter stood; just as though their plans had all been arranged beforehand.

Whether that shout from Josh calling on George to blaze away gave them additional cause for excitement, or the fact of the logs being wet and slippery made them lose their footing more than a few times, the fact was that

they took a number of headers, and found the passage a rocky one.

George was still shouting at the top of his voice, and the others joined in, so that the clamor was quite deafening. No wonder the loggers stood there unable to understand what it was all about, and why those two had abandoned the fine white boat that was now drifting alongside the raft.

"Too bad, Jack!" Josh was saying, when the two fugitives, after making their way along the logs finally vanished inside the door of the rude little cabin shelter.

"What is it?" asked the skipper, who had also shut off power, and was bent on bringing the Tramp alongside the raft just below the Saunterer; so that the white boat could be caught and secured, which would be one part of their plans brought to a successful completion.

"He's got the boodle, Jack, plague take the luck!"

"Yes, I saw that the small man was carrying a bag with him, and of course that holds the stolen bank papers and cash," Jack went on to say, as the Tramp's nose came with a gentle bump against the outside log.

"Tell me what to do, Jack!" Josh demanded,

knowing that the other must have a plan of some sort in view in making this landing, if their hugging the raft could come under that name.

"Just jump off and take the hawser with you," said the skipper, quickly.

"Then you mean to tie up here?" asked Josh, as he started to obey directions.

"Yes."

"Say, Jack, shall I get a grip on the painter of that other boat while I'm on the raft and make her fast?" continued Josh.

"Try and see if you can, because we want to take her back with us, even if we fail to capture the men," Jack replied.

No doubt George was bringing his Wireless alongside the raft on the other side, for he could see across, and note what the crew of the Tramp seemed to be doing.

Josh was quite active, when spurred on by excitement. When he had made a three-base hit in a game of baseball, he could stretch it to a home run better than any other fellow in town, with the shouts of the crowds to inspire him.

He began to hunt around for some place to fasten the rope, as soon as he had jumped on to the raft. This was so difficult a task, because there were many pegs showing, where

the logs were held together. And besides, here and there was a heavy rope passed along, to keep the waves made by steamboats from scattering the logs, which might have been of especial value.

Josh had just managed to accomplish this, and was turning to try and get hold of the bow of the white boat, which was still bumping against the side of the raft, when a terrific splash was heard from across on the opposite edge of the logs.

"George is overboard!" whooped Josh, thinking that the impulsive one must have been in such a big hurry to gain a footing, afraid lest a chum would be ahead of him, that he had miscalculated.

"You're wrong, it's Andy; and he's all to the good; climbing on the logs right now," came in the well-known tones of the Wireless skipper, and with a touch of sarcasm connected with the words, as though George wanted them to know that he was not the only fellow who could, in his haste, make blunders.

"Sure I am!" echoed Andy, "and the wather 'tis foine, I'm tilling ye, me laddybucks. Now, George, me darlint, whereabouts shall I tie up at?"

"Anywhere, so long as we hold fast," came the order.

Well, here was a strange condition of affairs, to be sure, Jack thought. He was a little puzzled to know what they ought to do next. The two desperate men had retreated within the shanty on the raft, which they undoubtedly meant to hold, after the manner of a fort, having abandoned Algernon's motor boat. The pursuers already had this in their possession, so if nothing more were accomplished, they could feel fairly well satisfied with their night's work.

But Jack felt that George, and for that matter the other two chums, would not wish to drop out of the game then and there. Knowing that the men in the shanty were the robbers, whose apprehension would bring great joy to the bereaved depositors in that robbed Lawrence bank, it would be just like them to want to keep going until they had either accomplished that end, or else found that they were not equal to the task.

Yes, and deep down in his own heart Jack was thinking along pretty much the same lines. He knew what it was to be greeted with cheers; and the desire to accomplish things worth while had a lodgment in Jack's heart.

They had the two rascals bottled up, as it

were; and surely some way could be found whereby they might force their surrender.

But it was not going to be an easy task. Those men knew what they must accept once they were taken into custody; and doubtless they would fight to the last gasp before showing the white flag.

CHAPTER XX

HOLDING THE FORT

All was silent over yonder where the makeshift little cabin shelter stood about the middle of the raft. The men had vanished inside, and were no doubt waiting to see what their enemies attempted next. Perhaps they indulged in the hope that the troublesome boys, assisted by Jenks, would draw off, and leave them to play their game to a finish in their own way.

At the same time they must be ready to defend their new place of refuge bitterly. Jack knew the folly of trying to carry a fort by assault, and he was not silly enough to think that with only George, Josh, Andy and Jenks back of him such a desperate undertaking could be carried out. Even if they received reinforcements in the shape of the two husky loggers, that would not mean the thing would be a walk-over.

Jack was himself on the logs by this time, and Jenks followed him. He hoped the men at bay would not start shooting toward them, for they were more or less exposed to any fire

unless they managed to drop down behind a stray log that had at some time gotten loose, and was hauled on top of the raft by the men in charge, rather than have it lost.

"Keep by your boat, George!" was the first thing Jack called out, "or better still, if you can work it around to where the Tramp lies. Perhaps we'd be wise to keep in a bunch, you know."

"A good idea, Jack," came the reply, "Andy, do you dare walk across, while I get a move on, and swim around?"

"Me, is it ye arre afther askin' that? Well, till me what's to hinder me from doin' the same?" and with the words the dripping Andy started to clamber along the slippery logs with utter abandon; he had been in the river once, and was just as wet as he could be, so why should he care if he went overboard again?

George started up and was seen to leave the float.

"Good-bye, and good riddance to you!" the big man shouted, as he thrust his head out of the opening in front of the cabin on the raft; from which remark it might be set down that he had not heard what Jack said, and really believed the motor boat was about to pull out for good.

"All right," replied the other, for it was not difficult to please Josh under most circumstances.

George had gone around the raft, passing below, so that he was now coming up the river, and it was easy for him to bring his boat alongside the raft without any bumping worth mentioning.

He quickly leaped on to the logs, rope in hand, and found a place to fasten his hawser without much trouble.

"Where are they, fellows?" he asked, breathlessly, as he joined the group.

"Still in the shack, but we're going to try and get them out," Jack answered.

"That's right," Josh broke in just then; "you see, Jack's going to try a scheme of mine, and offer the men a chance to get off, on condition that they hand over that bag they got. We don't want to bother with persons, if only we c'n trap that little bag, and take it back with us."

"Rats!" said George, immediately, for he never had the least bit of faith in any idea which Josh might originate; it would have put a different face on it it Jack had advanced the scheme; but with the other as its sponsor, the thing was impossible in the start and condemned before he heard the particulars.

"Well, you never know," Josh went on to say, as if he felt hurt at George being so positive before the proposition had even been tried, "they might be that bad scared they'd agree to anything that left 'em their liberty. Anyhow, guess there ain't any harm in doin' it, is there?"

"Wait and see!"

And with that Jack turned toward the center of the raft, where the little refuge lay, which the two loggers made use of as sleeping quarters, and to keep themselves dry during a downpour of rain.

"Hello! you in the cabin?" he called out.

"Well, what d'ye want?" came the answer, and as before, it was evidently the big man who did all the talking, for as yet they had not once heard the voice of Slim Jim raised above a low murmur, when he was arguing with his companion.

"We've got an offer to make you," continued Jack.

"Oh! have yuh? Then spit her out, and be quick about it," came from inside.

"We'll agree to let you both go, if you hand over that bag, and all that's in it," Jack continued. "We've got you caged, anyway, and its only a question of going for the officers in

one of our boats, when we come to a large town; and you'll be taken, bag and all. Better think it over. And we don't mean to let you work the sweep of this raft, so you can't ferry it to the shore. What do you say?"

He was answered with a mocking laugh, and some hard words.

"What d'ye take us for, younker, a pair of fools? Think we went to all that trouble and risk to turn the proceeds over to a passel o' kids so easy? Don't you worry 'bout us, now. We got the guns to hold the fort; and when we get good and ready p'raps we'll skip out. There's more ways to skin a cat than one. Get that, now?"

"I thought so," said George, with one of his irritating little laughs. "Now just get busy, Josh, and think up some more fool plays, won't you? Or else leave the job to your betters, Jack'n me, we'll play the game for keeps, eh, Jack?"

CHAPTER XXI

MAKING THINGS WARM

"Well, what are we going to do next, Jack?" asked Josh, pretending not to hear those irritating words spoken by George; and evidently determined to keep himself "in the swim" if anything was going on.

"The question is whether we'd better try to force their hand now, or wait a while," the one spoken to remarked.

"Why should we wait?" queried George, impatiently.

"First of all, there's some sort of chance that Herb may be along pretty soon, with his Comfort, and that would give us three more fellows," Jack observed.

"Huh! such as they are, yes," the skipper of the speed-boat admitted.

"Three would make good showing, anyhow," Josh broke in to say, seeing his opportunity to agree with Jack, and in this way put George on the other side. "And how'd they know, tell me, that Buster, Herb and our new friend,

Algernon, ain't much on the scrap? Numbers look big, sometimes."

"Then again," Jack continued, "as we float down the river we're apt to sight the lights of some town or city. And then George could go ashore to tell the police what a great chance was passing their doors. I'm not greedy about it, and willing enough to let the proper authorities do the fighting, and get what there is in the game. And yet, it kind of goes against my grain to just lie around here, doing nothing all the time."

"Yes," said George, eagerly, "and just think if we happen to drift anywhere near the bank these fellows are apt to give us the laugh and jump overboard, to swim ashore. Before we could get a boat started to chase after 'em they'd land, and snap their fingers at the lot. I say get a move on, and find some way to make 'em surrender. Let's scare the pair half to death. We c'n do it by setting the cabin on fire, and paying for the damage done!"

"Whew! that's just like George!" Josh was heard to say, breathlessly.

Jack glanced toward the two loggers.

"Is that sort of a thing possible; could the shanty be burned if we tried?" he asked them.

"Don't think it kin, son," came the reply.

"Course we never seen it tried; but them logs are kinder green yet, and the spray's jumped up over the cabin sometimes when we had a headwind. They ain't no winder in the shack, jest a openin' like round on the back. I cud crawl up and try the fire game, if so yuh stand ready tuh pony up fur any damage tuh the logs."

Jack was thinking again.

"Well, it might pay us to make the try," he said, presently.

"No harm done," said George, giving Josh a triumphant look, as though he would have him take notice that when really smart fellows started to do things, they meant business every time.

Josh shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that he was ready to be convinced. Meanwhile Jack was talking with the two loggers, trying to find out what their ideas might be with regard to getting a supply of kindling ready. One of them strode off, and presently returned with an ax. The other had picked up several strips of wood that seemed to be fairly dry; and as soon as the sharp-edged tool came he started to cut this into long splinters.

"By the way," said George, "I've got some cotton waste aboard my boat that's just soaked

with oil, and would burn like fun. I'll get it."

"And if you go aboard my boat, too, you'll find a lot more close by the engine, that I was going to throw overboard, because it was getting so sticky," Jack went on to tell the other, as he was hurrying off.

It really began to look like business, at any rate. Josh found himself interested in spite of himself. No matter whose plan it might be, if it won out he must show a spirit of fairness, and render all the aid he could. Josh was not a small minded fellow, though he did love to tease poor Buster on occasion; and often went out of his way to get a sly dig at the good-natured fat boy.

The strips of wood having been reduced to kindling, and George coming back with the cotton waste, saturated with oil that would burn, even if it was not explosive, it began to look as though the thing was now up to the logger who had offered to make the attempt.

"Here's a little bottle, and it's full of gasoline too," remarked George, as he handed the article over. "When you're ready to set fire to the pile, just scatter that stuff over it, and take care of your eyebrows, for she goes off with a whoop."

"Say, they're on to us," announced Josh just then.

Looking toward the cabin, Jack could detect a head thrust around the corner; and from this he knew that one of the men had issued forth, wishing to learn what the forces arayed against himself and his partner might be doing all this while.

So Jack made suggestive motions with his gun, as though tempted to shoot; and the head was withdrawn immediately.

"Is there any opening on the back of the shack?" he asked the men.

"Nope, not that yuh cud notice, son," came the reply.

"Course, they might dodge out and run around to blaze away at our fire kindler, and then get back under cover again," suggested George.

"I was thinking if I could work it so as to keep them quiet," said Jack. "Let's all move around so as to cover the side where the open door is. Then they'll be liable to think we're all there in a bunch. And if we see either man trying to sneak out, I'll give him a scare, all right."

To do this they had to go some little distance from the three tied-up motor boats; but Jack knew they could reach them long before the

fugitives might, should they conceive the wild idea of making a dash that way. Besides, as a last resort, did he not have his gun, and were there not two trusty shells in its barrels?

Having taken up their position they gave the man who had remained behind the signal that he should get busy. And he started to advance toward the rear of the cabin on the raft.

When he had gone perhaps half way, a figure was seen to push out of the opening. Jack immediately called out:

"Get back there, or I'll fill you full of shot!" at the same time brandishing his gun in a very threatening manner; which warning appeared to have an influence upon the fellow, since he slipped back again.

But no doubt he had discovered the logger who was advancing toward the rear of the shack, his arms filled with fuel; and it would have to be a very dull person who could not guess what his object must be.

Then there sounded a sudden report. One of the men in the shack had found some small chink between the logs, through which he was firing his revolver. Perhaps he had shot at the logger; and then again it might have been done just to alarm him, and thus cause the scheme for firing the cabin to be given up.

When the man seemed to drop, Jack's heart was in his throat, for he thought he was looking on a tragedy; but the other logger chuckled, as he remarked:

"Don't be skeered 'bout Fritz; he ain't teched a whiff; but jest drapped so 's to crawl out'n range. See him gittin' over ground right smart now, and notice thet he ain't let go any o' the stuff, be he?"

"You're right, Hanky," said Josh, promptly enough.

"Bully for Fritz!" burst out the gratified George, whose heart had no doubt taken just as quick a jump as had Jack's, when that report sounded in a half muffled way, from being inside the cabin.

Another shot followed. But the marksman was evidently shooting at random, and without having a target. At any rate, the logger kept right on creeping toward the shack, and it began to look as though he were bound to get there, too.

But would he be successful in getting the logs to burn?

Jack was rather inclined to doubt it, though of course much depended on whether they were fairly dry, or wet with the spray that may have

dashed up over the raft when the wind, being up-river, had made a choppy sea.

"What if the whole blooming raft goes up in smoke?" was the awful suggestion which Josh put forward.

George laughed out loud, it seemed to strike him as so absurd.

"Yes, and worse still, Josh, whatever will we do if we set the river on fire? They'll certainly have it in for us, believe me. But one thing sure, no danger of you ever setting the river afire with any scheme you think up."

"Shucks! I don't believe it'll work a cent," remarked Josh. " 'Cording to my calculations it'd take more'n that kindlin' to set logs a-goin'."

"Don't forget the oiled rags, Josh," said George, tauntingly; "yes, and the little bottle of gasolene I let our friend have. Seems to me all that's going to build up some fire. And as for the rest we'll have to trust to luck. Perhaps it'll catch fire, and again she may kick and balk."

"Like some engines we know about, t'r instance," Josh wound up with.

"You never saw a motor do better than mine did coming down river, and you know it. I have had a lot of trouble with the thing in the

past; but that's all over now; and I'm on Easy Street with my dandy Wireless. Oh! you can laugh all you want to, Josh, but wait and see."

"Proof of the puddin' lies in the eatin' of the same, George," said Josh, "and I know you too well to believe you'll ever be satisfied to run along like Jack and Herb do. But see there, our fire kindler's got up to the shack, all serene. And now he's bending down to fix his kindlin' right. We'll soon know, George, and if she goes, since it's your scheme, I'm willing to say you done it with your little hatch-it."

Just as Josh said, the logger had managed to gain the shelter of the back wall of the shack. Now, in order to keep out the rain without bothering with a door, the cabin had been made with its only opening on the side up-river; so that what the boys had been calling its back was really the front side.

And with the movement of the raft always down-stream; and the night air being from the south just then, if the fire were ever properly started, it would be fanned constantly, and helped along by this process.

Jack kept watch on the dark opening that stood for the entrance, and means of exit. He meant to shoot, if any figure was seen to appear

outside this; not with the idea of doing bodily injury, but in the expectation of frightening the man back, before he could make use of his weapon upon the fire-kindler.

So the seconds crept along, until several minutes had passed.

"Gee! why don't he get a move on?" remarked George, to whom the time hung as if it were weighed down with lead.

"Let him be," said the other logger, named Hanky, "Fritz is sum slow, but then he gits there in the end. Watch his smoke, son, an' see!"

CHAPTER XXII

"DROP THAT BAG"

They kept waiting, but George was very nervous because nothing seemed to happen. He growled to himself more than a few times; but none of the other boys paid any attention to that; because they knew George pretty well, and had run up against his little failings many a time.

George had no use for "slow-pokes." He expected to see Rome built in a day, and strange to say, while he met with lots of trouble on account of this very desire for haste, it did not seem to effect any permanent cure in his disposition; for as soon as the unpleasant result had worn off, he was the same old George again, —Hurricane George, they used to call him at home.

"There, looks like he's about got it fixed now," announced Josh, presently.

"Oh! thank goodness!" said the skipper of the Wireless with a sigh of gratification that welled up from his very heart. "Now perhaps there'll be something doing."

"He's getting out a match," Josh went on.

"You mean he's hunting all through his pockets for one," corrected Jack.

That gave George another spell of the blues.

"Chances are he won't have a blessed match about him," he observed, despairingly. "And I've got half a notion right now to crawl out there, and do the business for Fritz."

"No need," remarked Josh, "he's found one!"

Then they watched again, while the logger went through with a lot of what seemed to George utterly useless actions, fixing the kindling up a little better. And finally he started to strike the match.

The boys held their breath as they saw it flame up.

"Now, look out, Fritz, or you'll lose your eyebrows!" George was heard to mutter, as the logger leaned over to apply the little flame, which he had been shielding with both hands, after the manner of an old smoker.

"Wow!"

Josh did not mean to call out, but the cry was almost forced from his lips as he saw a vivid flash of fire, that seemed to jump as high as the roof of the little log shack.

"That was the gasolene!" remarked George, coolly.

"Fritz got stung, I guess, because he tumbled over backwards," Josh ventured, as his opinion; but although Jack had imagined that something along those lines might have happened, he did not see the man show any signs of suffering, as he started to crawl away from the spot, glancing over his shoulder now and then, as if to reassure himself that everything was going well.

"Naw, he's all right; Fritz kin be quick when he wants to get out o' the way o' things that hurts," the fellow logger advanced.

"Wonder if she's going to take hold?" Josh ventured, as he watched the fire eat into the kindling merrily.

"Wouldn't be s'prised if she did, now?" Hank remarked, as though he had experienced a change of heart since the match had been applied. "Looky thar at the way it's eatin' up the logs. Gosh! that makes a hot fire, boys, with them oil rags to keep her a-goin'. And sure as yuh live I c'n see it getting a grip o' the logs right now. Guess we won't hev airy shanty, come morning. But who keers. A little saw-buck o' a ten dollar bill wud make that squar."

Jack looked around.

If the cabin really caught fire, and began to burn furiously, it would not be long before

those within would have to vacate. He wanted to get a good idea as to what their next move would be; and for that reason he took this observation, so as to be posted.

And the first thing he saw was that the current of the river had swung the log raft in to the western shore during the last ten minutes or so. Why, it was not more than a hundred yards away; and as the moon hung in the east, the whole shore line was brightly illuminated.

Would not that prove an irresistible attraction to the pair of hunted thieves, provided they could swim? As a last resort might they not think to make a run for the edge of the raft, and spring overboard?

That was all right, provided they left the little bag behind. If on the other hand they tried to carry it off, Jack must know what to do about it. He feared that sooner than give up their plunder the scoundrels would deliberately throw it into the river, and thus defraud the depositors and stockholders of the Lawrence bank out of their valuable property, as well as sink the evidence that might be used to incriminate them as the looters of the institution.

How to prevent this was the question that was bothering Jack.

Would he be justified in trying to cripple one

of the robbers in case they attempted to carry out such a bold scheme?

He decided this quickly, when he remembered what misery would likely follow the loss of the bag, with its contents. Yes, what was one wretch's suffering when compared with that which would follow the closing of the bank's doors, and a sign on the outside telling that it would never be able to open again, because of the loss of the entire funds, and negotiable papers, as the paper had said.

Well, there did not seem to be any more doubt about the success of the fire, at any rate; for already were the flames beginning to creep up the wall of the cabin, licking greedily at the wood. They had gained such a good start that unless some fire-fighter got busy in a hurry, that shack was doomed, for the breeze fanned the flames wonderfully.

"They're coming out!" snapped George.

"Get ready, Jack, to drop 'em!" shouted Josh.

"There's the old Comfort drawing alongside the raft by our boats!" Jack sent back at them just then.

Perhaps those in the cabin had already discovered the other boat coming down with the current, for the opening was toward the up-

river end of the float, it may be remembered.

If so, it must have surely added to their uneasiness. They could see a number of persons aboard, and in the deceptive moonlight how were they to know that these passengers on the big launch were hardly to be classed with fighters, at least not very ferocious ones?

Imagine the astonishment of Herb and Buster, not to speak of Algernon, when, on nearing the dark object they had discovered ahead, it was to suddenly discover a blaze shooting up; and then on looking further to see Jack, George, Josh, Andy and the man Jenks, as well as two strange raftsmen ranged, about on a raft of logs, watching the burning cabin, as though it contained something they were greatly interested in.

And then to find the stolen white launch tied up to the raft—that must have given them a clue so they could figure things out fairly well.

The men had thrust their heads out at the time George and Josh seemed so positive they were coming. They could not have fancied the situation much; but then the sight of land so near by may have put some heart into them.

As the fire got hotter their condition must be growing more and more unpleasant. Jack knew that it was only a question of minutes, or more

properly, seconds, before they would be forced to expose themselves, and he was nerving himself for that crisis.

He saw Jenks and one of the loggers start to move to the other side of the raft, as though they would anticipate the possible coming of the men in that direction and be on hand to meet them.

"Keep clear, so that I can fire!" he called to them, making his voice as vociferous as possible, in order that the hiding men might catch every word, and be more or less affected by the startling intelligence.

"Oh! why didn't I bring my gun along?" groaned George, who was suffering agonies because he just had to stand there, and watch some one else run things; whereas, did he happen to have a weapon in his hands, he might have taken a much more prominent part in the proceedings.

One good thing about George was that he always wanted to be on the firing line; for he did not have a drop of craven blood in his veins. In baseball, football, hockey, it was all the same; George could be found wherever the play was fiercest, taking and giving knocks without a murmur, if only there was action, action, and then more action.

Jack heard his lament, and was secretly just as well satisfied to have things as they were. George was so impulsive that he might do things to be regretted in calmer moments. Such a hot-headed fellow was dangerous with firearms, especially when there seemed some little excuse for making a use of the same against a law-breaking pair like the bank robbers.

For a couple of minutes nothing happened; but the fire was burning fiercely and crackling at a great rate. Josh looked rather serious as he contemplated the conflagration; perhaps he was remembering George's absurd threat with regard to setting the river on fire; and thinking that they would surely have to get away before such a catastrophe came to pass.

Then, just what Jack had been expecting came about.

"There! there! Jack, look! knock 'em over!" shrieked George, as two figures started out of the burning shack on the raft, and began to hasten across the slippery logs as fast as they could go.

One of them, the larger, carried the hand bag; and from his determined manner it looked as though he meant to cling to that through thick and thin. Jenks and the two loggers were already trying to cut the fugitives off, and as though they began to fear lest that should really

happen the robbers changed their course a little, though still heading for the side of the raft that lay nearest the western bank of the river, so close at hand.

Jack fired one barrel of his gun, but he did not try to hit the fleeing men. It was just intended to let them know he had their range, for chips and water flew close beside the one who carried the bag.

"Drop that bag, or the next shot will lame you for life, do you hear?" shouted the boy, now fully resolved that he would have to shoot to wound, in justice to all those poor depositors up in Lawrence, for whom he felt so sorry.

Perhaps it was on account of the threat contained in his words; although the nearness of Jenks, and the other two husky men, may have had more or less to do with it; but the escaping burglar realized that it was a case of either letting his plunder go, or else being badly wounded, and then sent to the penitentiary for a term of years. And so, he relaxed his firm clutch, allowing the bag with the stolen funds of the bank to fall upon the logs of the raft.

CHAPTER XXIII

EVERYTHING LOVELY—CONCLUSION

"Hurrah!"

That shout of triumph seemed to break forth from several pair of lips at once, when the taller one of the two thieves dropped the bag he had been carrying, as Jack so plainly threatened to fire upon him at close range.

He was not so much of a fool after all, it seemed. If there was going to be a chance for escaping minus the plunder, why, it would have to go, that was all.

Somehow Jack was reminded of incidents in his own boyish career. He could see himself madly tearing across a field, with a whole bevy of angry bumble-bees chasing after him, and surging about his unprotected ears; and when they started to get busy with their hot little probes, what did he do but dash his hat off, and then his coat in quick succession. This was to attract the attention of the bees to other things, and let him escape. And the manoeuvre was usually successful, too.

Well, this smart rascal, finding himself threat-

ened with trouble, had just done the same sort of trick practiced by the bumble-bee fighters from away back in our great-grandfathers' days, throw something down to attract the attention of the hunters and hold their attention while he escaped.

It succeeded in the work it was intended to do.

Jack did not shoot again, and the others all seemed to think that, since the bag had been recovered, there was no especial need of almost killing themselves closing with the desperate burglars.

They knew that the men were armed, anyway, and would doubtless use their guns recklessly if cornered. Better to let them go, and call it a good riddance of bad rubbish; that was a boy's idea of the fitness of things. What was the use of being greedy; they did not aspire to be known as thief-takers; and besides, they owed it to those at home to have some respect for their own safety.

And so the two alarmed rascals, rushing to the side of the raft, sprang hurriedly straight into the river, striking out for the shore with all the haste they were capable of. Indeed, to see the way they fought the water, one would imagine that they fully anticipated having the whole

bevy of motor boats in swift pursuit, and that every second they could gain in the start was going to count in their favor.

But who cared?

Certainly not Jack, who, pouncing upon the precious hand bag, opened it just far enough to see that it was crammed with money and papers, just as they had been hastily pushed into it at the time of the raid on the Lawrence bank.

Some of the others came crowding around, anxious for a look; but Jack, with a wisdom that did him credit, remembering that there were a couple of big rough lumbermen present, whom he knew nothing about, not to mention Jenks, was smart enough to close the bag quickly.

"Is it all right, Jack; everything there?" asked George, eagerly; and then, as he caught the low word of warning which the other muttered he understood; for as quick as that he went on to say: "All our stuff recovered in fine style, eh, fellows? Let the scamps go; we ought to be only too glad to wash our hands of them."

"Hurrah for us!" shrilled Josh, brimming over with excitement.

All at once Buster, who had gained a footing

on the logs when Herb brought his big Comfort to an anchorage there, alongside the raft, was seen to be wildly rushing toward the edge, and waving his arms. Then he started to shouting after the pair of precious scoundrels who were battling with the waves of the river, and by this time almost half way to the nearer bank.

"Hey, bring back that sweater, you! That's my blue moon sweater you're wearing, and I want it, I tell you! I'll have the law on you for stealing, d'ye hear that, you sneak? Jack, why don't we start right out, and chase 'em with the Tramp or the Wireless? Seems like none of you fellers care a whit whether I ever get my bully old sweater back again. How'd you feel if it was yours, now, and a birthday present at that?"

But Buster's wild grief was suddenly turned into great joy; for Andy came running out of the shack, into which he had darted despite the fact of its being on fire, and he was waving something over his head as he advanced.

"Troth, phat do ye call this same, Buster? 'Tis a sweater, and sure there's a blue moon on the front, in the bargain. Don't ye say, the omadhaun sthripped it off so that he could swim better."

Buster clasped it to his heart, and actually

kissed the precious garment, which doubtless he had come to value more than ever, since he lost it, for we "never miss the water till the well runs dry."

And so, after all, the wonderful sweater came back to its own. Buster had it on right away, and seemed to feel that luck had marked him for its especial favors.

"Here, let's get busy!" cried George, "perhaps we can save the best part of this cabin after all. I see an old tin bucket that'll do to scoop up water with. Everybody work to put out the fire, fellows!"

That was just like George, who could be the most generous chap any one ever met. Those two loggers had been of considerable assistance to the boys in baffling the burglars and forcing them to give up their ill-gotten gains; so that it would be only right in their trying to remedy things as much as possible.

Well, the fire was soon gotten under control.

Meanwhile Jack had gone aboard the Tramp, where, unobserved, he could again open the hand bag, and extract some of the money; for he did not happen to have twenty dollars about him at the time, since they had not expected finding any use for so much cash on their simple little Easter cruise.

This he handed over to the two loggers, calling upon the others to witness the transaction, for he might want to prove it later on.

After that the boys began to think of returning up the river, and reaching their camp on Bedloe's Island. Algernon concluded that, since his boat was in fair running order, and he had the chance to elude the other "chappie," with whom he was playing a game of hide-and-seek while on the way to St. Louis, he had better take advantage of the opportunity, and keep right on down-stream.

Jack and his chums promised to care for what Algernon had left behind; and on the way up later he would drop in at the island to recover the same. If the motor boat boys were not in camp, having departed for home, he promised to see them there.

And so Jenks having gone aboard and started the engine, the Saunterer glided off down the Mississippi, Algernon shaking hands with each of the others in turn, and declaring that it had all been the greatest bit of excitement he had ever experienced; a remark, which caused Jack's crowd to grin, for, as we happen to know, the boys had been through some remarkable events in their time.

The three boats were soon on their way up

river; and reached the island before dawn. It was a pretty tired lot that crept into the tent, and slept for several hours. And later in the day Jack told them that in consideration of the forlorn condition which he knew the good people of Lawrence must be in, he would have to take a run over to a town which lay about eight miles above. Here he could send the precious bag and its contents, securely wrapped and sealed, by express; and at the same time dispatch a long message at night rates that would tell the directors of the stricken bank how all their valuable papers as well as the money that had been taken were on the way to them, particularly later when the motor boat boys got back from their little cruise down the Mississippi.

To this message Jack signed the names of the whole six chums, his own last of all. Then he and Josh managed to get back to the island before evening set in; and a great load had been taken from Jack's mind, when he no longer had to worry about that bag containing nearly all of the visible assets of the plundered Lawrence bank.

CHAPTER XXIX

Conclusion

"What's all this fuss going on out here?" demanded Josh Purdue, as he came crawling from under the folds of the tent.

It must have been well on to high noon at the time. The tired boys had been sleeping pretty much the whole morning away.

No wonder the thin member of the squad was surprised, for there was Buster Longfellow hurrying around as though the house had been afire. Nick could never accomplish anything worth while without a tremendous amount of spluttering; as all his mates knew only too well.

Wonderful to relate there was a pretty healthy odor of cooking in the air, that made Josh sniff approvingly; for of late his once poor appetite had grown to respectable proportions; and the thin boy could demolish his share of "grub" with the best of them.

Buster glanced around, and grinned.

"Oh! say, but I'm glad somebody else has had the good sense to wake up, and come out," he began to say.

"Looks like you might be doing the breakfast stunt all by your lonely," remarked Josh, coolly, as he started toward the edge of the water, no doubt intending to dash some of the same in his face, and thus refresh himself.

"I seemed to have had all the sleep I wanted," continued Buster; "and after I waked up I lay there for a long time, wondering if anybody had started in to get breakfast; but I couldn't get the first whiff of coffee."

"That's right, and an old habit of yours, I guess, Buster; always laying around waiting for the birds to come and put something in your mouth," Josh flung over his shoulder, with all the scorn he could summon.

"Well, p'raps it is one of my faults," admitted the fat boy, humbly enough; "we've all got our weaknesses, you know, Jack says, and you ain't any exception, Josh. But I felt as empty as an old tomato can, and just couldn't stand it any longer; so I crawled out, and I'm doin' the best I know how to get breakfast. But of course it ain't goin' to equal what you'd be givin' us, if you had hold here. Cookin' is one of your best stunts, Josh; fact is, I never knew any feller that could come near you."

When Buster wanted he could "soft soap" equal to the best of them; and while Josh under-

stood full well that this was a plain invitation for him to shoulder some of the responsibility for that coming meal, he found it impossible to resist the bland smile of the stout chum.

"Rats! you just spread that honey on thick so as to drag me in; but I'm on to your curves, Buster. All the same, hold the fort while I throw some of the Mississippi into my face, and I'll relieve you," he called out as he walked away.

"You're all right, Josh, and I don't care who hears me say so," cried Buster, who never could do the cooking act without getting so much pungent smoke in his poor eyes that he appeared to be weeping.

Possibly Josh found himself on edge for some refreshment, and that might account for his unusual kindness; for he speedily did show up, and took entire charge of the business.

About this time others began to crawl out of their bankets; and even George poked his head over the side of the Wireless; for, as was his usual custom, he could not feel perfectly happy away from his beloved if troublesome boat, even for a single night, and had slept aboard.

"Pretty late for breakfast, ain't it?" demanded Herb as they began to gather around while Josh started to divide the contents of the two fryingpans between them all.

"Oh! call it a warm lunch if you like," sang out Buster, who was feeling fine; "I began to think when nobody seemed to stir, that our next meal would be supper. So, as that was too much, I just determined I'd show you all that I could be progressive for once, and I started this bully meal agoing, didn't I, Josh?"

"That's right, Buster, so you did," nodded the one addressed, who was also in an unusually good humor, after the lively events of the preceding night. "But what are you alookin' at me like that for, Jack?"

"I was wondering if you felt like taking a little run with me, that's all," came the reply from the Commodore.

"In the Tramp, d'ye mean?" queried Josh, eagerly, for it struck him that Jack had honored him highly in thus deliberately picking him out when there four other fellows present.

"Yes. We may be gone the balance of the afternoon, but will surely get back before night sets in," the other went on to say.

"What's all this mystery mean, I want to know?" demanded George, pretending to look hurt; though he would not have cared to be a passenger on any other craft besides his precious if tricky Wireless.

"Yes," Jimmy broke in, "tell us about it, that's a good boy, Jack!"

"Well, listen and I will," the other started in to say; "you must remember that we've got a pretty hefty bunch of money along with us right now; and for one I won't feel easy so long as it's in our charge."

"Whew! that's a fact!" ejaculated Buster.

"P'raps there's all the stuff they hooked from that bank in the bag you tied up with that heavy cord, Jack," suggested Herb.

"No doubt of it," agreed the Commodore, "all but the twenty I took out to hand over to those two loggers to pay for their burnt cabin, and the help they gave us. But just stop and think what a terrible condition all the good people of Lawrence must be in right now, will you? I reckon half those in the town will feel the pinch of the broken bank, one way or another."

"Correct you are, Jack; because in all these towns the bank is supported by business men, widows with money to invest, and even laboring men deposit their little savings. You ought to know, Jack, because banking runs in your family, and George nodded, as though he wanted every one to see that he was in full agreement with the other in all he said.

"Well, to relieve their minds, and give them the first decent night's sleep they've had up to now since the bank was broken open," continued Jack, "I want to take Josh here, and run down river a ways to that town we noticed the light of when we were shooting past in the night."

"Oh! I see," remarked Buster, with what was a wonderfully quick perception, for him, "mebbe now you mean to wire on about it all, Jack."

"I expect to send a dispatch, telling them that the plunder has been recovered, and is coming back by express as fast as we can get it there; the full particulars will have to keep until the Motor Boat Boys get back from their little cruise down the Mississippi."

"And of course the news will float over to our little borough, in the natural course of events," suggested George, proudly.

"I c'n just see the good people waitin' to receive us with the brass band, and all the town run wild over the doings of the wonderful heroes of the old Mississippi!" cried Buster, waving his fork above his head excitedly, as he pictured the stirring scene in his mind's eye.

"Well, hardly that," said Jack, quietly, for he disliked all such exhibitions exceedingly; "because we won't let anybody know just when we expect to strike town again. In fact, if I can

fix it up that way we'll be apt to arrive after sunset."

"You mean sneak in like a dog with his tail between his legs?" complained George. "That's too bad, Jack. If we'd done anything we ought to be ashamed of it might go; but when a bunch of valiant lads carry on like we have, and not only chases the bank thieves to a successful finish, but manages to recover the stolen stuff, seems to me we'd only be getting our due if we let our admiring fellow townsmen make a little ado over us. You're too modest, Jack, and that's a fact.

"Well, we can settle all that later on," laughed the other, as he arose; "if you've had all you want to eat, Josh, suppose we get ready to take our little run."

"Weather looks O. K. out there, for one thing," observed Buster, as he scanned the serene surface of the mighty river, which of course was not to be compared with what the boys had seen hundreds of miles further down on their trip to New Orleans, though wide enough even at that.

"Little that would matter to a couple of well seasoned old tars like me'n Jack!" declared Josh grandly.

Going into the tent Jack speedily reappeared

bearing the wonderful little bag which they had so cleverly forced the thieves to drop on the preceding night, when that lively fracas occurred on the floating raft out upon the river.

Josh was already aboard the Tramp, and grinning for all he was worth, such was his satisfaction over having been chosen by the Commodore as his companion in this very important mission.

"Do we take the Marlin along with us, Jack?' he demanded.

"What for? Better leave it here for the boys to use if anything comes along," was the reply he received, as Jack clambered aboard.

"Oh! just as you say," remarked Josh, half reluctantly, as he handed the gun over to Andy. "Only I thought, you see, that we might happen to run across them precious rascals again, and if they tried to board us, we'd want something along to stand 'em off with."

George laughed mockingly.

"Listen to Josh, would you?" he cried. "He's sure going to dream of those two bad men for a whole month of Sundays. Why, they turned out to be kind of chicken-hearted after all. They gave up the bag as easy as you please, when Jack told 'em he'd send the second charge around their legs."

"And swim!" echoed Andy. "I niver saw annything to equal the loikes in all me loife. They was crazy to ra'ch the shore, so they was."

"Yes, but for all that they hated to lose the plunder after the trouble they'd been put to," continued Josh, not wholly convinced; "and if the chance came along to make another try for that bag, believe me, they'd grab on to it. But just as Jack says, it goes; and I reckon the little Tramp can show 'em a clean pair of heels if it comes to a run?"

"Why, man alive, they wouldn't have any boat, because you remember they abandoned the one they had, and we've fetched it along with us, to discover who owns the same, because we believe it must have been stolen," Herb ventured to say.

There were few preparations to look after, for Jack always made it a point to have his boat in good running order, so that none of the boys could really remember when it had ever gone back on its owner.

Of course he first of all made sure that there was plenty of "juice" in his tank; each of the boats carried an additional supply of gasoline aboard, in case of necessity, for they had figured out the trip systematically, and knew to a fraction of a gallon what quantity they would need,

so that it had been easy to prepare for extra occasions by making a very generous allowance.

"Goodbye, and good luck!" called Buster, as he waved his hand after the starting Tramp.

"Somebody look out for supper, because you just can't depend on me always!" Josh sent back.

"Oh! that's all right, Josh," replied the fat chum, contentedly; "there are three other fellers in this crowd, and I reckon I've done my part of the cooking stunt for one day."

The gallant little motor boat was soon moving along with the current of the river, and keeping rather in toward the west shore; because it had been in that quarter Jack remembered seeing the lights of some sort of town while chasing after the bank thieves on the preceding night.

"How long ought it to take us to get there, d'ye think?" asked Josh, as he made himself quite comfortable.

"It might be an hour and a half, and again we may be all of two hours making port," answered the skipper of the Tramp, as he busied himself with the reliable little motor that as yet had never failed him in an emergency.

"If the river was straight we might even now glimpse the town with our glasses," suggested Josh.

As the minutes flew past the two chums enjoyed themselves as boys naturally would under similar circumstances; especially after having passed through such a series of exciting happenings as Jack and his comrades had.

They reviewed the entire programme, and Josh declared that he would never forget the sight of that ramshackle cabin on the raft of logs, burning so furiously, while he and the rest were almost holding their breath with impatience, as they waited for the two yeggmen to dash out after the heat inside had become unbearable.

"There's the place we're making for!" cried out Josh, suddenly, as they began to pass a point of land that jutted far out into the river.

"Just about where I reckoned it was," returned Jack; "and we'll make a landing in about half an hour at most."

He proved to be a true prophet, for in less time than that the bustling little motor boat drew in toward the shore, because they were now opposite the town.

A heavy freight train was rumbling along in plain sight, headed north, Jack happened to notice; and slowing up while passing through the small river town.

"I'm glad that the railroad runs past here,"

he told Josh, as they headed for a little landing belonging to what seemed to be a boat-builder's establishment, for some such place is to be found at nearly every town bordering the big rivers of the West.

"What for?" asked the other, preparing to fend off, so that they would not strike too hard.

"Why, don't you know, we want to make use of the express company and the telegraph line the worst kind just now; and the railroad tells us we're going to find both here waiting for us."

"That's a fact," muttered Josh, wondering how it was Jack always thought of everything.

The owner of the river boatyard now approached, and Jack soon made arrangements with him to leave the Tramp in his charge while they were gone.

Buster had found out that the provisions were already running low in several particulars, perhaps on account of the savage appetites several members of the party had shown, who in times past had not been heavy eaters.

And to please the fat voyager the Commodore had promised to pick up a few tasty things. As their little Easter cruise had turned out to be such a "howling success" as George called it, they could afford to celebrate with a feast or two. Buster was great on suggesting reasons

for indulging in some unusual spread; but in this instance everybody had agreed with him that they really had a good reason for doing the same.

Picking up the little bag, which the river man glanced at casually, never dreaming that it held thousands and thousands of dollars in bills and specie, Jack started up the bank.

He had already asked a few questions of the man, and had his bearings all right. There was an express and telegraph office all in one, and once they reached this, at the railroad station, their troubles would be over.

Jack expected to take ample precautions so as to make sure that the bag would get to its destination without being tampered with. He had figured all this out in that active mind of his, and even explained the particulars to his companion, who pronounced the scheme first-class.

Josh was plodding along ahead of his mate when all of a sudden he felt Jack pluck him by the sleeve.

"Wait up a minute, Josh, can't you?" declared the other; "I'm carrying something of a load, you must remember, and this is a pretty steep grade up to the railroad tracks."

"Oh! excuse me, Jack," said Josh, falling in step with the other.

"Listen!" he heard Jack say in a low, tense tone; "perhaps we're going to have some more trouble about this bag after all!"

"Oh! thunder! what do you mean now?" demanded Josh, astounded.

"Here, none of that!" said Jack. "Don't look so startled, but laugh, just as if I might be telling you a good joke. There, that's more like it, though I reckon your laugh was half frozen before it got out. Now, pay attention to me!"

"Sure I am, Jack; go right along and tell me what's up."

"There are two men watching us come up this bank right now," Jack went on to say. "We've made a turn so it wouldn't be easy for us to chase back to the boat again. I've got a notion, Josh, they're the very rascals we made give up this bag of boodle last night!"

"What's that, Jack? However could they get up here; because it was far down the river we left that pair swimming like ducks?"

"Well, I half remember seeing somebody drop off that same slow freight as it ran through; and yeggs like to travel like tramps, you know," and Jack pointed out upon the river, as though

he might be explaining something to his friend.

"Oh! mebbe they were just stealing a ride on the bumpers, and happened to see us acomin' in to the shore," suggested Josh. "Yes, of course they'd be apt to guess what fetched us here, and when they glimpsed that precious bag in your hand they knew. But Jack, what can we do? Oh! why didn't you let me carry our Marlin with us? You see what a valuable thing it'd be right here and now?"

"Yes, it would have been better," admitted the other; "but no use crying over spilt milk, Josh. We must figure out how we can give them the slip; and I think I see a good chance right now."

"Then tell me, because I want to know," pleaded the other, eagerly.

"They're hiding behind that pile of old ties," said Jack; "and if we kept straight on as we expected to do we'd strike the railroad track just about there."

"But now you won't, will you, Jack?"

"We'll walk on a few steps, as though we hadn't changed our minds a bit," Jack told him. "But as soon as we strike where the bank hides us from their eyes we'll turn sharply to the right, and scuttle along as fast as we can make it. By the time we have to show up again

we'll have put some little distance between the men and ourselves; and then we'll make a push for it as fast as our legs will carry us."

"Bully idea, Jack; and it's just bound to work too; only I do wish you'd gone and let me lug that gun along. Oh! what wouldn't I give right now for a chance to fill the legs of the slick yeggs full of bird shot!"

Josh was hurrying after his chum while talking in this strain. Upon arriving at the spot where, as Jack had said, they would no longer have the friendly shelter of the bank, the two lads suddenly started off on a full run, heading direct for the town close at hand; indeed, already they were among the scattering outlying houses of the same.

A loud series of hoarse shouts from down the track told that the pair of yeggmen had caught sight of them.

Josh, casting one fearful glance over his shoulder, discovered them in full pursuit.

He even bent down and snatched up an occasional piece of rock or scrap iron, as though determined to fight to the last in case of being overtaken.

But Josh was a fast runner, and Jack himself had few equals in his home school. They certainly had plenty of reasons for doing their

level best when they found themselves pursued so hotly by that pair of lawless tramp burglars.

As usual Jack had his eyes about him, and was noting the lay of the land. When any one makes good use of all his faculties, as this boy generally did, he is apt to take advantage of openings that would never occur to most fellows.

"This way, Josh!" Jack flung over his shoulder, for he was still doing the leading, though the long-legged one might easily have gone ahead had he wished, weighted down as Jack was by the heavy bag.

With every jump they made they were pushing further and further into the centre of the little river town.

Women came to the doors to see them running, attracted by the angry shouts of the men; who, having succeeded in coming up closer to those they chased were hoping to frighten them with threats, so that they would drop the bag.

Children, too, scattered like chickens at the swoop of a plunging motorcycle; and huddled at the sides of the street, gazing wide-eyed at the running boys and pursuing men.

"Bang!"

Apparently one of the desperate yeggs had managed to keep his revolver in serviceable

condition, in spite of his submersion in the chilly waters of the Mississippi.

"Not hurt, I hope, Josh?" cried Jack, over his shoulder, as he still kept running wildly.

"Nixey, not!" gasped the other; "but I'm adoin' all I can to shield you, Jack!"

Which he really was; and in that moment Jack saw further into the generous soul of the tall comrade than fortune had ever allowed him to do before.

"It's going to be all right, because there's a policeman running out of that house ahead. It must be police headquarters, because I see another coming. Keep going just a minute more, Josh!

"Whoo! good for a whole hour yet!" exploded the other, defiantly.

Before half the minute was up Jack gave an exclamation of satisfaction; at the same time he slackened his pace.

Encouraged by this to take a backward peep, Josh discovered that the two yeggs had not only stopped their hot pursuit, but were actually running the other way. Men of their stripe never do like the sight of blue uniforms and brass buttons.

Of course Jack had a surprising story to tell the two policemen. He did not take the time

to explain everything, save that he and his friend had been fortunate enough to recover some valuables taken from the bank of an up-river town, and that there would surely be a nice fat reward offered for the apprehension of the precious pair who where even t' en in plain sight, making off.

This was enough to excite everybody; and presently the policemen, as well as a posse of eager private citizens had started on the run after the fleeing pair.

Josh gripped the hand of his chum.

"Another close call, Jack, let me tell you; but the same old Stormways luck held good, and we came out of the big end of the horn. And now I reckon it's us to the station to get this stuff off our hands, and a receipt for the same; as well as to send that cheering message to Lawrence."

They soon made all arrangements. The agent at the station proved to be a middle-aged and sensible man, who was deeply interested in as much of their story as the boys chose to tell him. He did the bag up good and strong, and sealed the same, so that it could not be tampered with except at the company's risk.

Then, after sending a message, "collect," which bore the good news to the mayor of Law-

rence, and to which he signed all six names, his own last of all, Jack was ready to do his little marketing, and start back to the island; which, in due time, they reached in good shape.

Of course the boys had a glorious time of it during the balance of the week. Buster, happy in the recovery of his sweater, was the life of the crowd, and caught many a fine fish, for he was at it early and late.

They figured that it must have been that the two thieves, remembering they had secured no paint with which to change their white boat to one of darker hue, had stopped off at the next town, and entered the boat builder's place in order to pick up the necessary material; and seeing the sweater, as the night air was chilly, the big man had put it on. The other white boat was claimed by a party thirty miles above Lawrence, who proved that it had been stolen three days before the robbery of the bank.

Jack, on running across the little mound where the box planted by Algernon still lay, for the boys had insisted on burying it again, asked Herb about it, and from him learned that the small dog had been a pet of the Saunterer's skipper, that had taken a fit, and died on the trip, which accounted for the strange burial.

And when finally their outing came to an end,

and the motor boat boys reached home, they found that once again they were being spoken of as heroes. Why, all Lawrence united to do them honor; and besides a fine reward that it was insisted they should accept for their gallant deed, there was a document worthy of being framed, and hung in the club room, signed by the president and directors of the bank, thanking them most heartily in the names of all the depositors and officers of the institution, many of whom would have lost their all had the valuables not been recovered.

And after that all banks around that section of the Mississippi Valley began to take notice, and make preparations against raids by gangs of daring yeggmen; so that the lesson was going to prove of great value to the community.

Of course we shall hope and expect to meet Jack, George, Josh, Andy, Herb, and last but far from least, genial Buster, again before a great while; when possibly they will be starting out once more on some adventurous trip that would deserve being written up. Until that time let it be only goodnight, and not good-bye.

The End.

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